



TOM'S GIFT

Karen Plautz

*For Jen – my lifelong friend, beta reader,
unpaid editor, and number one fan.
Thank you for everything.*

Tom's Gift

By Karen Plautz

CHAPTER 1

Tom was raking grass clippings near the big oak tree. Now that he'd put the lawn mower away, all was quiet. Except for Mrs. Singleton; Tom could hear her crying. It seemed like she'd done nothing but cry for the past two weeks – ever since Mr. Singleton had come to visit and told her that he and the children were moving away from Bright Creek and they wouldn't be coming to visit as often anymore. Mr. Singleton had explained that, ever since she'd been in the accident, things had been difficult for both him and the children. Living in the house they'd shared for so many years had become too much for them; there were too many memories of her there and those memories made it hard for the family to move forward. He told her he'd put the house up for sale and they'd found a new place in Smith Falls – far enough away from everything in Bright Creek that reminded them of their pain. Mrs. Singleton had begged and pleaded with him not to go, not to leave her, but her pleas had fallen on deaf ears and Mr. Singleton had left. She'd been crying every day since.

Tom worked his way around the ancient oak, raking the grass clippings into several small piles. As he rounded the big tree, the sound of Mrs. Singleton's crying faded and was replaced by John Martin asking his brother, Joe, if he remembered the time they took their father's car – without permission – and drove over to Seneca for a double date with those twin sisters. Joe responded that he sure did, and he also remembered that *his* twin had been the prettier one. Then the brothers laughed. Tom thought how odd it seemed that the Martin brothers had been so close when they were young only to have had a falling out as adults and not spoken to each other for most of their lives after that, until they'd both arrived here. Now it seemed they talked a lot about those younger days, but Tom had never once heard them talk about the falling out or all the years they'd not been a part of each other's lives. They seemed only to reminisce about the good times and not speak

of those later years.

When Tom had gotten all the grass clippings raked into neat piles surrounding the big oak tree, he leaned his rake against the tree and walked toward the little road. It was the day was growing hot and he rolled up his sleeves as he walked. He came to the dusty road and turned down the slope. Walking to the bottom of the slope he headed to the shed where he kept his tools and supplies. As he entered the shed, he ducked under the doorway so he wouldn't hit his head. It had become habit over the years to duck as he entered; he didn't even think about it anymore. The doorway was far too low to accommodate his six-foot, three-inch frame. Once inside the shed and out of the sunlight, he waited a few seconds for his eyes to adjust then looked around for the lawn bags.

He pushed the wheelbarrow up the road and as he passed Mrs. Archer, he turned left onto the grass. He walked back toward the grass clippings he'd raked into piles, passing Mrs. Singleton on the way. She was still crying. *Poor thing*, Tom thought, shaking his head. After retrieving his rake, he shook out a lawn bag and started collecting grass from the nearest pile and putting it into the bag. The Martin brothers were still laughing and talking about their boyhood days. Their conversation kept Tom entertained as he cleaned up the grass and bagged it, chuckling along with the brothers as they laughed about this prank or that one.

Once the grass clippings near the big oak had been bagged, Tom made two trips back and forth to the shed to wheel the full bags inside the shed to store there until trash day when the recycling truck would pick them up. As he was hauling the last bag into the shed, he heard a car drive slowly by and, looking out, he saw it turn up the same road he'd just come down. *I wonder who has a visitor*, Tom thought. He finished stacking the bags in the shed, grabbed some more empty bags and tossed them in his wheelbarrow with the rake, then took hold of the handles and started back up the road. Up ahead he saw the car that had passed, it was at the top of the slope and

was pulling over to the side of the narrow drive that ran through the grounds. When the car had edged as far as possible to the side of the road, it stopped, and the engine died. A man got out and walked around to the passenger side and opened the door, holding it while a woman slid out. She held a bouquet of flowers, which she handed to the man before smoothing down her skirt. The woman was wearing tall high-heeled shoes which made Tom shake his head and chuckle. *Why do women always insist on wearing high heeled shoes to a place like this? That's just a twisted ankle waiting to happen*, he mused as he watched the couple cut across the lawn.

Tom pushed his wheelbarrow off the road and onto the lawn. He made his way across the grounds and around the stone bench, headed toward the twin oaks. The twin oaks were not even close to being as old or as big as the big oak tree, but they were close together. Tom had always assumed that when this place was given the name Oak Lawn the planners had figured they needed more than just one oak tree, so they'd planted the twin oaks across the drive and within sight of the big oak. The good news, as far as Tom was concerned, was that the twin oaks didn't produce nearly as many leaves or acorns as the big oak and this meant not as much leaf raking in the fall.

He saw the couple from the car headed toward the twin oaks as well – by a much straighter route than he – and he wondered who they were here to visit. Perhaps the new woman, Mary Colter. She hadn't been here for more than a week and he'd yet to see her have any visitors. Tom walked along and watched as the man and woman passed the twin oaks and, sure enough, they stopped when they reached the newest resident of Oak Lawn.

Tom stopped when he reached the twin oaks and pulled his rake from the wheelbarrow. He began raking more grass clippings into piles while surreptitiously watching the couple who'd come to visit Mrs. Colter. The man and the woman were speaking but he couldn't hear what they were

saying. He could, however, hear what *she* was saying in response. She was not at all quiet about it and she was definitely not pleased by the woman's visit. She was pleading with the man – Randy she called him – not to trust her sister. The visiting woman stood off to the side, her arms crossed, looking perturbed. The man had his head bowed, his back to Tom as Mary Colter went on her tirade. Tom slowed his raking so he could listen better.

It was only a few minutes later that the man turned and began making his way back toward his car. The woman stayed behind. She seemed to be crying now, but as the man walked away from her, she quickly regained her composure and smiled. Her lips were moving, but again, Tom couldn't hear what she was saying.

As the man approached the twin oaks, headed for his car, Tom stopped his raking and said, "Afternoon." The man nodded in response and kept walking.

As he passed, Tom said, "She doesn't want you to trust her sister. She's really upset."

The man stopped abruptly and turned back. He looked at Tom, a look of confusion on his face – which quickly changed to irritation. Tom was used to those kinds of looks; he got them quite often. He knew what people said and thought about him, but he didn't care. Sometimes he just couldn't sit idly by when there were important messages that needed to be passed on.

"She says her sister is stealing from you."

"What the..." The man looked at Tom with a mixture of anger and desperate hope. "What are you talking about?"

"Mary wants you to know her sister is stealing from your company. She didn't tell you before because she didn't have proof, but now... now *she knows* and..."

"Stop right there!" the man commanded. "I don't know who you think you are, but you don't know anything about me, or about Mary..."

"She says 'Randy, hush now.' She wants you to listen."

The man's expression changed to shock when Tom spoke those words. He stammered, "W-w-why did you say that?" His eyes were wide and intent on Tom's face.

"I didn't say it," Tom replied, "Mary did."

The man took a step toward Tom. He looked at him with a bewildered expression and said, "Mary always told me to 'hush now.'" His eyes silently pleaded with Tom as he spoke.

"Then just listen for a minute," Tom said before continuing. "Mary says you'll find proof that Cindy is stealing from you if you go over the books. She says it's important that you don't say anything to Cindy. Don't let her suspect anything – just get the books and take a look when she isn't around. Mary says you'll find all the proof you need. She wants your promise that you'll look, will you?"

The man looked past Tom at the woman who was now approaching them. He turned his attention back to Tom and wiped his brow as he said, "Yes. I'll check the books." He pulled himself together then turned and walked away from Tom and toward the car.

As the woman hobbled her way past him, her heels sinking into the ground as she walked, Tom reached out and touched her arm, stopping her. She looked down at his hand with disdain, then her eyes swept up to his face and she looked at him with outright contempt. As her mouth opened, Tom spoke before she could say a word. "Give the rings back, Cindy," he said.

A look of panic crossed her face as the color drained out of it, but she quickly recovered and sputtered, "Well, I never!"

"Just give the rings back to Randy. It's bad enough you buried Mary in a dress you knew she hated, but to steal a dead woman's rings right off her finger? Despicable!" Tom spat with disgust. He let go of her arm then and turned back to his raking.

The woman stood indecisively for a split second, then began running on her tiptoes after the man calling, "Randy,

wait! Wait for me! That man back there is *crazy*! Did he say anything...?"

Her voice trailed off as she moved further away from Tom. He stopped his raking and watched as she scuttled after the man. The man kept walking and didn't even look back; he climbed into the car and started the engine then sat waiting, looking straight ahead.

Tom watched as the woman stumbled her way to the car and got inside. The man put the car in gear and slowly drove away. Tom chuckled to himself. As he went back to his raking he thought, *it's a wonder the damn fool woman didn't break both her ankles trying to run across the lawn in those shoes!*

Tom rarely knew what results came from the messages he passed on, but it didn't much matter. Just like it didn't much matter to him that people thought he was crazy. He passed along messages when he felt they were important, whether he'd been asked to or not. Not that some people would even stop to listen – but all the same, he felt he at least had to try. And occasionally, someone would come back later and thank him – or want to know if there were more messages – but more often than not, by the time that happened the soul who'd given Tom the message had already left from this place and moved on to wherever the souls went next.

Tom didn't know why he'd suddenly started hearing the dead. It wasn't something he'd been born with. He hadn't spent all of his forty-three years with the ability to hear the dead. He'd been caretaker at Oak Lawn for over fifteen years. He'd started working in the cemetery when he was twelve, doing odd jobs for the former caretaker, but it wasn't until after he'd been hit by the car that had killed his Rosalie that he'd begun hearing the voices of the dead.

He and Rosalie were on their way home from a movie that night. It was only a short walk from downtown to Oak Lawn and it had been a pleasantly warm summer night; a nice night for a walk. As they were crossing the street in front of the movie theater a drunk driver suddenly accelerated out of

nowhere and ran them down. Tom was told later that Rosalie had been killed on impact. He, himself, had been in a coma for three days after the accident. When he woke from the coma, he'd had no memory of the accident. Having been unable to attend Rosalie's funeral pained him still – more than two years later. He hadn't been there, and he hadn't gotten to say goodbye. Rosalie's family had given her a quick, quiet burial. They'd never forgiven her for marrying Tom. Rosalie hadn't cared because she truly loved Tom and her relationship with her family had always been less than perfect anyway. Tom still marveled at how it was even possible that *he* had been the object of Rosalie's affection.

* * * *

Tom hadn't known his own parents. Having been abandoned as a baby, he didn't even know if Tom Hopkins was the name given to him by his mother, or if it had been given to him later, but it was the only name he'd ever known. He grew up in foster care, moving from one home to another throughout his early years. Tom learned early on to stay quiet and stay out of trouble. He tried to stay under the radar because, more often than not, attention was not a good thing. Attention usually meant negative attention so Tom tried not to call attention to himself in any way; you never knew what might happen. Most of the homes he'd lived in were with people trying to play the system. They didn't care about Tom, or any of the other children they fostered, they only cared about the check they got every month for being foster parents.

In his younger years, Tom had received very little affection. He hadn't learned what it was like to love and be loved. He'd been quiet and shy; an easy target for bullies. When he was nine, he'd been beaten so badly by bullies in his neighborhood that he was removed from the foster home he was living in then and moved to Bright Creek. When his social worker came to pick him up from the hospital he was cut and

bruised; his finger was broken; and he had a black eye and a cracked rib.

The social worker picked up Tom's meager belongings from the place he'd been living before she picked Tom up that day and she told him that he wouldn't be going back to that family; she was taking him to a new foster home. He didn't respond to her words – he was used to being shuffled around – and truth be told, he was not unhappy to be leaving this last place, so he just got into the car and sat staring out the window as she drove them away from the hospital and toward his new foster home. Tom sat quietly, not acknowledging the social worker's words as they drove along. Eventually she exhausted her attempts to get Tom to engage in conversation and gave up. She switched on the radio and began to hum along. Tom watched the scenery roll by as they drove to Bright Creek.

When they arrived in Bright Creek, the social worker turned off the radio and told Tom that it would be just a few minutes more before they arrived at his new home. She told him that she thought he would really like this new couple that would be his foster parents. They seemed like really nice, decent folks she said. Tom didn't respond to her words; he'd heard them all before. He didn't dare to hope that this time they would be true. He just expected the worst – that way he wouldn't be disappointed.

They turned into the driveway of a pretty little bungalow with painted shutters and a detached garage. The neighborhood was old; established. The street was tree-lined, and the yards and homes were well maintained. Tom sat up straighter and looked around. This was different than anyplace he'd lived before. It was *clean*. It was like something on TV; like *Ozzie and Harriet* or *Leave it to Beaver*. Tom felt a little stir of butterflies in his stomach as he opened the car door to get out. There was the tiniest hope within his small chest that *maybe* these people would be nice; *maybe* he would be happy here.

The front door opened as they were coming up the walk and a man and woman came out onto the big, wide porch.

They were both smiling. The man stepped down to take Tom's battered duffel bag. He said hello to the social worker and then to Tom. Tom looked up at the smiling man. He *looked* friendly – but then, they all did when the social worker was there. He said a quiet hello in response to the man and the man nodded and turned to carry the duffel bag into the house.

The woman stood on the porch as Tom and the social worker approached. She was smiling and she looked down at Tom and said, "You must be Tom! It's so nice to finally meet you! Please come in!" She waved them through the door then followed as they entered. She ushered them into the living room and invited them to sit down. Tom sat in an armchair that matched the one adjacent to him that the woman sat down in. The social worker sat on the couch.

"Tom," the social worker began, "this is your new foster mother. Her name is Mrs. Connor." She looked at Tom expectantly and visibly relaxed when he did as expected and politely said hello to Mrs. Connor.

Mrs. Connor beamed at him and said, "Mr. Connor and I are so happy to have you here, Tom. We do hope that you'll like it here with us." Tom nodded in response but didn't reply.

Mrs. Connor and the social worker began chatting about this and that – Tom wasn't really paying attention – while he looked around the room. It was very neat and tidy. There was a fireplace with a clock on the mantle (he could hear its steady *tick, tock, tick, tock*); a basket of wood on the hearth; some pictures on the walls. There was a coffee table with some magazines on it between the two armchairs and the couch, and in the corner, there was a TV. Tom hoped they would let him watch TV sometimes. As he was thinking this, Mr. Connor came into the room.

Mrs. Connor said "Tom, this is Mr. Connor."

Tom looked up and Mr. Connor said, "Hello Tom. What'd you say you and me go out to the kitchen while the women talk?" He nodded toward the hallway as he spoke. Tom

got up and obediently followed the man out of the room. They went down a short hallway, past some stairs, to the kitchen. It was painted a bright yellow and Tom thought of the word "sunny" to describe it. Mr. Connor pulled out a chair from the kitchen table and gestured for Tom to sit, so he did.

"Would you like a brownie, Tom?" Mr. Connor asked. "Mrs. Connor made them especially for your arrival today." He looked at Tom and waited for his response.

Very quietly, Tom said, "Yes. Please."

Mr. Connor said, "Okay then!" and he opened a cupboard and pulled out a couple of saucers and glasses. "How about a nice, cold glass of milk with that? I always say there's no better way to eat brownies than with a nice, cold glass of milk!"

"Yes, please." Tom replied.

"Great!" Mr. Connor said and went to the fridge to pour them both a glass of milk.

Tom heard Mrs. Connor in the front hallway saying goodbye to the social worker at the front door. She closed the door after the woman had left, then headed back to the kitchen. "I see Mr. Connor is getting into the brownies already!" Mrs. Connor laughed with good humor, "He just LOVES brownies! I do hope that you like brownies, too, Tom. Do you?"

"Yes ma'am. Very much. Thank you." Tom said.

"Oh, aren't you a polite young man!" She gushed. "I'm glad that you like brownies. I wasn't sure if you would. But I'll have plenty of time to get to know your likes and dislikes now that you're here" she said cheerfully. She pulled out a chair and sat down at the table as Mr. Connor placed the plate and glass on the table in front of Tom. He went back to the counter for a couple of napkins and put one of those in front of Tom too, before pulling out his own chair and sitting down.

As Tom ate his brownie, Mrs. Connor told him how very happy they were that he had come to live with them. She explained how she and Mr. Connor had always wanted children

but, unfortunately, they hadn't been able to have children of their own. After trying for many years, they'd finally decided to become foster parents because they so wanted to have a child to love and take care of and she hoped that Tom would give them a chance to make a happy home for him. She told him that she knew it would be an adjustment period for him – for all of them – but she hoped that he would like them and that he would like living there with them. She told him that she hoped he would eventually come to feel as if he were their very own son.

Tom looked up at her from under the fringe of his bangs as she spoke. He slowly chewed his brownie and nodded now and then so she would know he was listening. When he'd finished his brownie and most of his milk, she asked him if he would like another. Without waiting for his reply, she took his plate to the counter and put another brownie on it and brought it back to Tom. She sat it in front of him and looked at him with warmth before sitting back down.

"Thank you," Tom said politely.

"You're welcome, Tom" she responded with a smile.

Mr. Connor held up his empty plate and winked at Tom as he said, "If Tom gets two it's only fair that I get two." Mrs. Connor indulgently smiled at him and took his plate. She went back to the counter for one more brownie and placed it in front of her husband.

"Yes sir!" Mr. Connor exclaimed. "There's nothing like home-cooked brownies, eh Tom?" He smacked his lips as he took a big bite and made Tom giggle just a little bit before he caught himself and stopped. Mrs. Connor noticed Tom's behavior and she giggled herself, just to let him know that it was okay to laugh.

"Mr. Connor can be so silly!" she told Tom. "You'll get used to it, eventually," she said and giggled some more. This time Tom giggled with her.

When they'd both finished their second brownie, Mrs. Connor said, "If you've had enough brownies Tom, maybe

you'd like to see your room now?"

"Yes ma'am. That would be nice," he said shyly.

Mrs. Connor cleared away the plates and glasses as Mr. Connor got up and with a sweep of his arm he said, "Right this way, Master Tom."

Tom got up and followed Mr. Connor from the room with Mrs. Connor coming after them. Mr. Connor led the way to the stairs they'd passed by earlier, and then led the way up them. Tom followed behind him, trying not to stomp too loudly (his previous foster mother had incessantly yelled at the children for stomping up the stairs). He looked up the stairway in anticipation. He wondered if he dared to hope that this might truly be a permanent home for him.

When they reached the top of the stairs, Tom saw an open door to his left. He looked inside as they passed by it and he saw that it was a bedroom with a big bed. Mr. Connor said, "This first room here is our bedroom. The door on the right over here is the bathroom." He paused by the door so Tom could look inside then continued to the next door on the right. It was closed. "And *this...*" he said, "...is your room." He opened the door and stepped back to let Tom enter the room first.

Tom slowly stepped through over the threshold and immediately thought that he must be in a dream! There were bunk beds – and *he* was the only kid! There was a desk near the window with a lamp and a writing tablet and pencils on it. There was a bookshelf with some books and a stack of board games on its shelves. There was a dresser with a big mirror on top and a closet next to that. The last thing Tom saw as he swept his eyes around the room was a baseball bat leaning in a corner next to a mitt with a ball perched inside of it.

Mr. Connor saw him looking at the baseball equipment and said, "I hope you like baseball, Tom. But if you don't, we can take those back and get you a football or a soccer ball – or whatever else you'd rather have."

"Oh no, sir," Tom said with awe. "I like baseball just

fine!" Mr. Connor smiled at the look on the boy's face. It warmed his heart to see the light in the boy's eyes.

Mrs. Connor said, "And we got you bunk beds because we thought it might be nice when you have friends over. I hope that's okay?"

"Yes ma'am!" Tom said with joy swelling up in his breast. Now he knew for sure that he was going to be the only kid in this wonderful room. He slowly crossed the room and ran his hand over the blanket on the bottom bunk. It looked brand new and it felt very soft. Tom had never had a blanket so nice before. The adults watched him as he slowly moved around the room touching first this, and then that.

Mr. and Mrs. Connor looked at each other hopefully and then Mrs. Connor said, "We'll just give you a little time to yourself to settle in Tom, but we'll be right downstairs if you need anything. Feel free to come downstairs anytime and if you'd rather just stay in your room for a little while, that's okay, too. I'll call you when it's time for dinner if you haven't come down yet, okay?"

Tom nodded and said, "Yes, ma'am."

"I put your bag in the closet." Mr. Connor told him. "We really do hope you like your new room, Tom." Mr. and Mrs. Connor left Tom then and went downstairs.

That had been by far the best day of Tom's young life and each day after, his life had continued to get better. The Connors had become Tom's permanent family from that day forward. They'd given him a loving and happy home and they always treated him as if he really were their own son. Tom had grown to love them both very much. The Connors were the ones who'd taught Tom about being loved.

They couldn't, however, shelter Tom from the harsh realities of the world as he would know it outside of that loving home. Tom had started school in Bright Creek with an optimism he'd never known before but being the new kid and being as shy as Tom was, it had not been easy for him to make friends. He was smaller than most of the other boys in his class,

and not just thin but *skinny*. He had very little experience playing team sports, so he wasn't very good at it. He was, of course, the last one picked for teams in gym class. The other boys teased him or made fun of him in front of the girls so he, as usual, tried to fly under the radar and keep to himself as much as possible.

When he was at home, he and Mr. Connor did all kinds of things together. They played catch in the backyard; they went fishing; they built a treehouse; they planted bushes when Mrs. Connor decided she wanted hedges; and they worked on cars in the garage. Tom was happy with his life in Bright Creek. His life in his new home, with his new parents, more than made up for any taunting he received at school. At least in Bright Creek no one ever beat him up. Instead, they mostly avoided him and labeled him *weird*. And that was fine with Tom. The few kids that were friendly with him had also been labeled as weirdos and that, too, was okay with Tom. He was happier than he'd ever been and he didn't ask for more.

* * * *

When Tom was twelve, he got a job helping out at the town cemetery. It was called Oak Lawn Cemetery and it was just on the edge of town. The caretaker was named Ned and he was a short, squat man with a bald head and hairy arms. He looked mean, but in reality, he was a very nice man. Tom liked him a lot. Tom worked with Ned a few hours a week after school with stuff like raking or shoveling snow or snipping hedges. Ned talked Tom's ears off, but Tom liked that – even though he, himself, didn't have much to say in return. Ned taught him all about being caretaker at the cemetery. How to tend to the lawns and the plants; how to keep it looking pretty and clean by removing old, dead flowers before they looked old and dead; how to keep the headstones looking nice; and how to repair the stones that were broken by kids or storms and whatnot. Tom liked the solitary quiet of the cemetery. It

was a stay-in-the-background type of job and he didn't have to interact with people, which was another thing Tom liked. He also liked doing the physical work, and he enjoyed being outdoors. All in all, it was a pretty good fit for Tom.

Of course, when word got around at school that Tom was working with "Ned the Head of the Dead" (as the kids in town called Ned), it hadn't made him any more popular. Instead, he was now not only *weird*, but *creepy* as well. Tom could just imagine how much more unattractive this made him to the girls in school, but he didn't much care. He didn't figure he would ever have a girlfriend anyway – or even a date, for that matter – so he ignored what people said about him (and he ignored what people said about Ned) and he enjoyed his part-time job.

Over the next few years, Tom went through a growth spurt and went from being small and skinny to suddenly being taller than most everyone in school. He was still thin, but not as painfully skinny. As Tom grew in stature, he became more noticeable at school and this led to more teasing from his classmates. He was no longer just another *little weirdo*, now he was a *big weirdo* and his relative anonymity was harder to maintain once he was head and shoulders above the crowd. Tom tried to take the taunting in stride and not let it bother him because there wasn't much else that he could do.

CHAPTER 2

One day when Tom was sixteen, he was walking home from school and he saw Rosalie walking ahead of him, a stack of books in her arms. Tom knew who she was, of course, but he'd never spoken to her before. He walked along at a distance behind her, watching her and thinking how pretty she was. Lost in his thoughts, he didn't hear the pounding of running feet as they approached him from behind. Suddenly, he felt a shove in the middle of his back as the boys running past him tried to push him down. He heard their laughter as he stumbled – but didn't fall – and they kept running on. When they reached Rosalie, he saw one of them bump into her shoulder as he ran by. She didn't fall down either, but the stack of books she was carrying fell to the ground in a heap at her feet. The boys laughed and kept going.

Tom jogged ahead to where Rosalie was squatting down to retrieve her books. He bent to help her and gathered some of the books from the pile on the ground. He and Rosalie stood up at the same time. He was tall and gangly while she was of average height (for a girl) and perfectly proportioned. She smiled up at Tom and shyly thanked him. He said it was nothing and asked if he could carry her books for her. She hesitated for a moment and then quietly said yes, yes that would be nice. Tom took the books from her and added them to his own books and turned to walk beside her.

They didn't speak for a few minutes, neither of them knowing what to say, and then Rosalie said, "You're Tom, aren't you?"

"Yes," he replied, surprised that she would know his name.

"That's what I thought," she said. "Those boys are so stupid!"

He didn't say anything to that, he just looked at the top of her head as she walked along beside him. He wondered if she knew how pretty her hair was. The way the sun shone on

it and made it look so soft.

"Thank you, Tom, for helping me with my books. I do appreciate it," Rosalie said as they walked along.

"It's nothing," Tom mumbled in response.

When they got to the next corner, Rosalie stopped and turned toward him. "This is my street," she said, holding out her arms for the books.

"I, um, I could carry these all the way home for you – that is – if you'd like me to?" he asked hopefully.

She took a brief look down the street toward her house then looked back at him and said, "No, Tom. That's okay. But thanks for the offer."

Disappointed, he handed the books over to her then stood there not knowing what to say.

"Thanks again," Rosalie said. "I'll see you around, huh?"

"Sure," Tom awkwardly replied.

She stood looking up at him for just a moment more, then turned and started walking toward home. Tom watched her until he realized he was just standing there like an idiot. Then he crossed the street and continued on his way.

Rosalie walked the rest of the way home feeling the weight of the books in her arms and thinking about Tom. She glanced back briefly, but Tom was already out of sight. Rosalie thought he was kind of cute. He'd seemed awfully nice, too. Sure, she knew the kinds of things the kids at school said about Tom, but the kids at school also said lots of things about her – and she knew the things they said about her weren't true. Maybe the things they said about Tom weren't true either. She also knew that Tom worked at the cemetery after school, but just because a person worked in a creepy place, that didn't necessarily make the person creepy too, did it?

Rosalie wondered at how she and Tom had been going to the same school ever since he first came to Bright Creek, yet they'd never been in the same class. Kind of strange when you thought about it. After all, Bright Creek wasn't that big and

there was only one high school. She and Tom were in the same grade, too. Anyway, even though she didn't have any classes with Tom, their lockers were in the same hallway, so she did see him almost every day in the hall near their lockers. She'd never had a conversation with him in all these years either – until today – if you could call what had just passed between them a conversation. But then she was shy, especially with boys. She wasn't outgoing like her sisters.

She had known who Tom Hopkins was though, since about five minutes after he'd come to live with the Connors. Word got around fast in this town and Rosalie's sisters knew everyone and everything that went on here. That was one plus to having sisters who were pretty and popular – Rosalie got to hear all the latest gossip by eavesdropping on her sisters. She wished she could be more like them sometimes, but she couldn't just wish it and make it so. *Maybe, she thought, maybe the next time I see Tom I can at least get up the nerve to say hello.* She smiled to herself and hugged her books tighter to her chest as she walked up the front steps and onto the big covered porch of her house and went inside.

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Tom walked along toward home with his books tucked under his arm and his hands in his pockets. He was thinking about the way Rosalie's hair had looked with the sun shining on it. He'd been able to smell the warm scent of her shampoo. He smiled wistfully at the memory. Tom wondered if Rosalie knew how pretty she was. He figured she probably did. How could she not? Although she didn't seem to be as popular as her sisters were, surely she had plenty of boyfriends. Tom didn't really know that much about her. They'd never been in the same class, so he wasn't very familiar with her. He'd always known who she was, of course. She came from one of the most prominent families in town. But he'd never spoken to her before today. He'd never had the opportunity, really. He saw

her in school often enough, in the hallways and such, but he tried not to pay too much attention to girls at school. He knew what they thought of him – that he was creepy and a weirdo. Most girls in school either ignored him completely as if he weren't there, or purposely avoided walking anywhere near him. Oh sure, there were a few girls who did talk to him now and again but those were girls who got stuck being his lab partner or girls who needed to borrow his notes or get his help with their classwork. He couldn't really call any of them his friends.

Tom sighed as he turned up his driveway. He needed to change into his work clothes and have a snack before heading over to the cemetery. He didn't have time to be thinking about girls. Well, more specifically, about *a* girl – about Rosalie. She would never be interested in the likes of Tom Hopkins. He shook his head as he went into the house. No sense thinking about things that would never be, and Rosalie becoming friends with him would most certainly never be.

* * * *

Rosalie came from a well-to-do family that had lived in Bright Creek since its founding. Her family name was on many of the oldest buildings in town. There was a park across town that was named after her family; her ancestors had donated the land to the town. She lived in a big Victorian house on a street lined with similarly big Victorian houses. Her family had built the house generations ago. Rosalie's father was a banker. Her mother was the daughter of another well-to-do family that had also lived in Bright Creek for generations.

Rosalie was the youngest of five girls. They ranged in age from sixteen to twenty-five. Her sisters were all blonde and blue-eyed; Rosalie was a mousy brown with green eyes. Her sisters were all vivacious and outgoing while Rosalie was shy and reserved. Her sisters had all had lots of boyfriends at

her age and gone to lots of parties and other social gatherings, but Rosalie had yet to have even a single boyfriend, and only went to the parties her parents made her go to. Her sisters were all popular and pretty; Rosalie had few friends and thought herself wildly unattractive. She kept to herself and she read a lot. She wasn't into shopping and clothes and all the things her sisters thought important. She thought most of those things to be shallow and unimportant.

Rosalie had always been a good student in school. She'd never been in trouble (unlike her sisters) and never caused her parents any worry. In fact, Rosalie didn't think her parents were even aware that she existed most of the time. They were always so busy with this function or that function. Rosalie's mother had never worked a day in her life. Well, not for a paycheck anyway. She was a member of the Women's League, the PTA, the bridge club, various charity associations; she played golf and tennis at the country club; she gave dinner parties and cocktail parties and everyone raved at what a wonderful hostess she was. Rosalie's mother was always busy. This was the kind of life she envisioned that each of her daughters would have one day. It was her *expectation* for her daughters. She expected that they would all go to college – but not with the intent of having a career – with the intent of landing a proper husband from a good (rich) family.

Rosalie had different dreams for herself. She didn't want to live her mother's life. She did want to go to college, though not for the reason her mother wanted her to go, but because she loved learning. She got good grades and she wanted to make something of herself that was independent from her family and her family's money and social standing. She wanted to be her own person and live her own life. She wasn't sure yet what that life would be, she just knew it wouldn't be her mother's life or the life her parents expected for her.

Rosalie had never felt as though she fit in with her own family. She was nothing like her sisters. She didn't like

shopping or parties or any of the other activities that filled her sisters' time. She dressed more sensibly than they did. She studied and got better grades than any of them ever had. She didn't feel she could ride through life on her beauty (not that she felt she *had* any beauty) like they did. Rosalie had never felt content with her life. This was one of the reasons that Rosalie had always read so much. It was her way to escape the discontent she felt and to live in someone else's world, if only for a little while as she turned the pages of a book.

Rosalie yearned for the day when she would be grown and could leave home and no longer have to live up to her parents' expectations or live in her sisters' shadows. She figured she would go away to college and maybe then her life would become more interesting. Maybe she could reinvent herself and make lots of friends once she got to college. Certainly (she hoped) she would have more friends and more of a social life once she got away from home than she did now. No one would have to know that she was the ugly duckling of a rich family. She could be just like anyone else and maybe people would like her for who she was inside, and not for the family she'd been born into.

Rosalie and her sisters had been raised by nannies when they were young. Her mother was never much of a hands-on kind of mother. Her mother and father had never been very warm or accessible. They treated their daughters like trophies or commodities – something to be taken out and shown around to their friends when it suited them. They had high expectations for their daughters to be popular; to wear the latest fashions; to marry the right sort of men; basically, to make their parents look good.

Unfortunately, Rosalie had never been very good at making her parents look good. And she didn't care to. She thought her parents' expectations were unfair and stifling. Another reason she always tried to stay on the periphery as much as possible. She knew that ultimately she would always be a disappointment to her parents no matter what she might

accomplish in her life. She just didn't fit the "family mold" in either looks or motivation. But that was fine with her. She rather liked it that way. She couldn't be something she wasn't, no matter how much her mother tried to shove her into the mold. So instead, she tried to stay out of the way as much as she could. No attention was better than being noticed by her parents for something she did wrong – or for what they deemed were her shortcomings. She was biding her time until she graduated high school and could go away to college and leave her mousy life behind.

* * * *

Rosalie thought about Tom later that night as she sat looking out her bedroom window at her twin sisters and a few of their friends out who were out on the front stoop. She wondered what Tom was *really* like. When he'd first come to live with the Connors, Tom had been skinny and scrawny; now he was tall and lean but well-muscled. His hair was brown, darker than Rosalie's mousy color, and his bangs hung low over his eyes. She'd never noticed his eyes before today when they'd stood awkwardly looking at one another for those few moments. His eyes were brown like his hair. Rosalie thought they looked like kind, intelligent eyes. She'd known Tom was as nervous as she was as they walked down the sidewalk side by side. She wondered if Tom had ever had a girlfriend. She thought probably not because he was labeled a "weirdo" at school; she doubted many girls would ever consider dating a social pariah like a *weirdo*.

As Rosalie climbed into bed that night, she decided that the next time she saw Tom she would at least say hello to him. Who knew? Maybe they would become friends.

* * * *

The next day, Rosalie saw Tom in the hallway headed

toward his locker. When he looked her way, she called out to him. "Hello, Tom!" she said and smiled at him. Tom smiled and nodded at her and continued on his way down the hall. Rosalie felt a little burst of warmth in her chest when Tom smiled at her and her smile stayed with her as she headed off to class.

After that day, it became a new habit for them both to say hi or to wave or smile at one another as they passed in the hall between classes. Over the next few months, they seemed to develop a kind of friendship, even though they still hadn't had a real conversation. Tom found himself looking forward to the sight of her each day. It was a nice feeling, having a pretty girl say hello to him and wave or smile at him each day, even if she was just being polite.

Rosalie found herself thinking of Tom more and more and wondering if he liked this or that; wondering if they had anything in common. Did he like to read? Did he sit out on his porch at night and look at the sky, as she often did? What was his favorite color? His favorite food? What did he like to do for fun?

On the last day of school before summer vacation, Rosalie stayed after class in last period to help the teacher and by the time she came out into the hall it was practically deserted and there was paper and other debris strewn all over the floors where students had emptied their lockers out onto the floor in celebration of school being let out for summer. Rosalie made her way down one hallway to the next on her way to her locker. There were a few kids still cleaning out their lockers, but for the most part, everyone had left school already. As she rounded the corner and headed toward her locker, Rosalie thought about Tom. She wondered if he was excited for summer break. She wondered if the Connors would be taking him away on vacation this summer. She knew that her family would be going to their cottage at the lake, as they normally did, and she wasn't looking forward to it.

Every summer her family went to the cottage and

Rosalie felt even more alone than she did at home. Her sisters would be at the beach flirting with boys all day, every day, and she would do as she usually did and sit in the shade and read. But before they went to the cottage, there would be the big graduation party for the twins who'd just graduated.

Rosalie's mother had been planning the party for months now and wanted it to be THE social event of the summer. Rosalie dreaded it. She hated parties. Especially parties that her parents threw. Her mother always made her wear some stupid designer outfit that made her uncomfortable but that her mother said was "appropriate" for their social circle. Rosalie wasn't looking forward to seeing what her mother would force her to wear this time. She also wasn't looking forward to smiling sweetly as her mother pushed her into conversations with boys or with friends of her parents. She cringed just thinking about it. And she was sure that her sisters would be shining stars (as usual) and that they would be surrounded by boys and superficial girls acting all stuck-up and too good for anybody. She didn't know how her sisters could stand hanging around with those girls, but they did. They were part of that clique and fit right into it. Even though Rosalie never thought of her sisters as being stuck-up like those friends of theirs, in truth, they were. She thought her sisters were okay, as sisters went, but they were just like her parents and cared too much about appearances and clothes and parties and what people thought of them.

Rosalie loved her sisters, but she couldn't be like them. She couldn't be most popular or the life of the party. She would suffer through their graduation party and then they would go to the lake house where she would spend the summer mostly on her own. Her sisters always encouraged her to join in with the beach volleyball games, but Rosalie wasn't very athletic and was too self-conscious to be able to have fun. To their credit, her sisters were never unkind to her – quite the opposite, really. They tried to get her to go along with them when they went shopping or to the beach or to bonfires at night, but Rosalie

just didn't feel like she fit in, so she rarely went with them. It was sweet of them to try to include her, she knew, but being social just wasn't *her*. And so, she stayed mostly to herself and didn't enjoy going to the cottage like the rest of her family enjoyed it.

Rosalie opened her locker and began pulling out the few things that were still in it (she'd cleaned most everything out earlier in the week) and put them into her backpack. As she was standing on her tippy-toes making sure she hadn't missed anything in the upper slot, there was a voice behind her.

"Hello, Rosalie."

Startled, she turned toward the voice and saw Tom standing there, his backpack slung over one shoulder. He smiled at her and said, "I'm sorry. I didn't mean to startle you."

"Uh, it's okay," she replied. "How are you, Tom?"

"I'm good. How about you?"

"I'm good too."

They stood there awkwardly looking at each other (again) then Tom nervously asked, "Um, could I walk you home today, Rosalie?" He wanted to look away from her then, but he forced himself to maintain eye contact. His palms were sweaty. She didn't answer right away, and he felt sure she was going to say no.

"Sure, Tom. That would be nice." Rosalie smiled at him and he inwardly sighed with relief. "Just a sec while I grab the rest of my stuff." She turned and finished stuffing the contents of her locker into her backpack. When she was done, she turned back to him and asked, "Ready?"

"Yep. All set. Could I carry that for you?" he asked, indicating the backpack in her hands. She smiled at him again and handed it over. Tom slung her backpack over his free shoulder, and they started walking down the hall toward the exit doors.

They didn't speak again until they were outside. Tom held the door for her as she walked out into the sunshine. She tilted her head up briefly and felt the warmth of the sun on her

face; she smiled. Tom smiled at the picture she made standing there with the sun shining on her.

Rosalie let out a sigh and they started off for home walking side by side. She had butterflies in her stomach; she couldn't believe a boy was walking her home from school. A boy had never walked her home from school before.

Tom walked along beside her, trying to think of something clever or funny to say. His mind was a blank. The only thing he could think of was how pretty she was and before he knew it, his mouth was open and he was saying it out loud.

"You sure are pretty, Rosalie." As soon as the words had left his mouth, Tom's face turned red with embarrassment and he mentally kicked himself.

Rosalie stopped walking and looked up at him, "Do you really think so, Tom?" she asked, her eyes blinking as she looked up at his face and the sun hit her.

"Of course I do, Rosalie. I think you're *very* pretty." Tom wondered if she could see that he was blushing; her head tilted to one side as she considered his words and then she blushed, too, and smiled.

"Nobody has ever told me that before. I mean, nobody but my parents – you know?" Tom nodded and she went on, "Thank you. Your compliment means a lot to me." She looked away then and started walking again and he fell into step with her as they continued on. "Are you excited for summer break, Tom? Will you and your family be going away on vacation?"

"I guess I'm excited," he said, "And I think we might go up to the lake later in the summer. My dad and I usually go fishing. It's not that exciting, I guess, but it's something we always do together. We usually rent a place on the north end of the lake for a few days and when we bring back the fish, mom cooks them up for us and we have a family fish fry."

"That sounds nice," Rosalie said wistfully. A moment later she said, "We have a cottage at the lake you know. We go every summer. Maybe if we're up there at the same time we'll run into each other. You think?"

"That would be cool," Tom responded, and his heart pounded in his chest at the thought of it. He was sure she was just being polite, but it still buoyed his spirits to hear her suggest such a thing. She would probably be far too busy going to beach parties and stuff to want to spend any time with him over summer vacation but the thought of it being possible, made his pulse quicken.

They walked along talking about all kinds of things, each of them becoming more comfortable with the other as they found out they had things in common; shared interests and mutual likes and dislikes. They talked a little bit about school and their families but mostly they talked about books. Rosalie was delighted that Tom was also a reader. They discovered that they'd read many of the same classics. It gave them topics of conversation that they both felt comfortable with and they found that they enjoyed talking to one another.

By the time they reached Rosalie's front stoop, the two of them felt like old friends. They stopped and sat down on the steps. Tom took Rosalie's backpack off his shoulder and set it down on the porch behind them. They were quiet then, neither of them wanting the conversation to end and neither of them wanting to say goodbye, but neither of them knowing what else to say.

Finally, Rosalie asked Tom, "When do you think you'll be going to the lake, Tom?"

"We usually go sometime in July, but I'm not sure, exactly. When will you be going?"

"We'll be leaving in a few days. We usually stay at the cottage most of the summer."

Tom's heart sank. He was hoping he might get to see Rosalie again soon but if she was leaving in a few days, it probably wouldn't happen. She was looking at him expectantly, so he responded, "Oh, so soon? Well, I hope you enjoy your vacation. You must know everybody up at the lake if you go there every year. I'm sure you'll be busy having fun all summer." As he spoke, he hoped his disappointment at that

thought didn't show.

"Thanks," Rosalie said half-heartedly. She, too, was disappointed. She knew that she wasn't looking forward to going to the lake, but she didn't say so to Tom. She wished she could see him again before she left, but he was probably going to be busy. "Maybe when you get up to the lake we could hang out," she suggested.

His heart soared at the thought, "Do you think so?" he asked hopefully.

"Sure. I can give you our number at the cottage and you could call me and let me know when you get there, okay?" She didn't wait for his response before reaching behind them and opening her backpack to pull out a pencil and paper. She scribbled the number down and held the paper out to him. "Promise you'll call?"

"Absolutely!" Tom said with a wide smile as he took the slip of paper. "Thanks, Rosalie. I'd better get going now. I'm sure you've got packing and stuff to do and I have to get to work soon." He stood up and put the paper into his back pocket. Rosalie stood too and picked up her backpack.

"Thanks for walking me home, Tom. I had a really nice time talking to you." Again, she smiled at him and he returned the smile.

"Me too," he responded. "I guess I'll be seeing you," he said and turned to go. He headed down the sidewalk, turning back to wave when he reached the end of her walk, then he turned and walked off toward home.

Rosalie stood on the stoop and watched him until he was out of sight. There was a light feeling in her chest and she was smiling as she turned and bounded up the steps and onto the porch. She stopped short when she saw her mother standing inside the screen door watching her, a frown on her face. "Rosalie," her mother said sternly, "You come in here right now. We are going to talk," then she turned and walked deeper into the house.

Rosalie followed her inside, her heart sinking. Her

mother was obviously upset with her and Rosalie knew why: Her mother disapproved of Tom.

* * * *

Rosalie had gotten a good talking to that day. Her mother had told her in no uncertain terms that she was not to see *that boy* again. She said Rosalie should know better than to be friendly with a boy of *that sort*. What was she trying to do? Ruin her reputation? She was better than that, her mother had said. She should be spending time with boys of her own ilk and not boys *like that*, her mother told her. Her mother had forbidden her to see Tom again.

Rosalie told her mother that she understood. She assured her that she knew her mother was right. She'd agreed that Tom was not the type of boy that would fit into their family. She'd nodded and agreed with whatever her mother said until her mother got it out of her system and sent Rosalie up to her room to pack for the cottage.

Later that evening at dinner, Rosalie's mother brought the subject of Tom up to Rosalie's father and he, too, had expressed his disapproval of Tom. Rosalie listened to all that her father had to say on the subject as her sisters looked aghast at the idea that Rosalie would even *speak* to that *weird* boy from school. Everyone in the family made it very clear that Tom was not good enough for Rosalie, and Rosalie sat quietly nodding her understanding in between bites of her dinner.

After dinner, the twins called her into their room and asked her *why*. They couldn't understand why she would let a boy *like that* talk to her, much less why she would be sitting on the stoop of her very own house with the likes of him. She listened as they told her all the rumors they'd heard about Tom over the years and she reassured them that there was nothing for them to be worried about; that she barely even knew Tom. When they were satisfied that she understood that Tom was not the kind of boy she should be friendly with, they let her go

back to her packing.

Rosalie went back to her room and closed the door behind her. She'd known that her family wouldn't approve of her being friends with Tom and she hadn't been surprised at any of the things they'd said about him. She knew she'd just have to keep it a secret from her family – what they didn't know wouldn't hurt them – and *if* Tom called her at the cottage, she would just hope that she was the one who took the call. If she wasn't, she'd have to make sure she convinced her family that she had no intention of ever seeing Tom again. She was sure they would believe her. Then she would sneak out and see him anyway.

She felt good about her plan; she was sure it would work. No one paid any attention to what she did with her days at the cottage anyway; they were all too busy. Now she'd just have to wait and see if she heard from Tom or not.

CHAPTER 3

Rosalie's number practically burned a hole in Tom's pocket. For weeks he'd carried it around with him. He must have pulled it out and looked at it a thousand times. It was tattered and threatened to tear at the creases. Not that it would matter if it tore, though, because Tom had memorized the number the day Rosalie had given it to him. He pulled it out and looked at it so often, not because he was afraid he'd forget it, but because he wanted to reassure himself that it was real.

He still couldn't believe that Rosalie had actually written her number down and given it to *him*. What if she regretted it now? What if she'd changed her mind about seeing him at the lake? Or worse, what if it wasn't even her number and she'd given it to him as some kind of joke? It wouldn't be the first time someone had gotten a good laugh at Tom's expense. What if... NO! He was not going to let himself worry. He would force himself not to think those things. He was going to trust in Rosalie and hope the number was real. It would only be another week before he would find out and he *so* wanted to believe.

* * * *

A week later, Tom and his parents were in the car on their way to the lake. He sat in the back seat, impatient. When they finally reached the south end of the lake they stopped for supplies as they always did. Mr. Connor dropped his wife at the small grocery store then drove to the gas station next door to fill up the tank. When he pulled up and parked next to the pumps, Tom got out and headed for the pay phone. He reached in one pocket and pulled out the slip of paper with the telephone number on it; he reached in another pocket and pulled out change for the phone. He stood there for a minute just staring at the phone. He looked down at the number, now faded and hard to read from all the handling it had received

these past weeks, and he took a deep breath. His palms were sweaty and he suddenly felt like he might throw up.

He looked back up at the phone, gathered his resolve, and lifted the receiver off the hook. He dropped his coins in the coin slot and waited for the dial tone. When it sounded in his ear he drew in another deep breath, held it, and dialed the number. He was still holding his breath when the phone on the other end started to ring. He slowly let out his breath as it rang and rang in his ear. No answer. He let it ring a few more times and still no one answered. Finally, he hung up. When he placed the receiver back on the hook, his coins fell into the coin return and he retrieved them. He shoved the coins and the paper into the same pocket and dejectedly walked back to the car where Mr. Connor was washing the windshield.

Mr. Connor looked up as Tom approached. He didn't ask who Tom had been calling and instead he said, "Why don't you go over to the store and see if you can help your mother. I'll finish up here and wait for the two of you in the grocery parking lot."

"Okay," Tom said, and he turned and walked across the parking lot and into the store.

As Tom was walking across the parking lot, Rosalie came up the street on her bike. She saw Tom walking through the door into the grocery store and called out to him, but he was already inside and didn't hear. She parked her bike and dashed into the store after him.

Tom walked through the store, checking each aisle until he found his mother. Just as he caught up to her, he heard his name being called from the end of the aisle. Both Tom and his mother looked up at the same time and saw Rosalie. She waved and came toward them smiling. Tom's heart nearly jumped out of his chest when he saw her. Until that moment, he hadn't realized just how much he'd wanted to see her again and how utterly disappointed he'd been when he'd called the number and gotten no answer – he hadn't known if it was really her number or not.

"Tom," Rosalie said, a little breathless, "I'm so glad I ran into you!" Her smile was wide and sincere. Mrs. Connor stood by quietly and watched as this very pretty girl looked at her son with what appeared to be affection. Tom looked from Rosalie to his mother and back again.

"Uh, hi Rosalie. This is a surprise..." He looked to his mother and said, "I'm sorry. Mom, this is Rosalie. Rosalie, this is my mom."

His introduction was a bit awkward and his mother could tell he was nervous around this girl. Wanting to put them both at ease she said, "It's very nice to meet you Rosalie. I'm sure you kids will just excuse me while I finish stocking up, won't you? I hope you'll come and visit us while we're here, Rosalie, you'd be welcome any time."

"Thank you, Mrs. Connor. It's very nice meeting you as well." Mrs. Connor smiled at the girl and then at Tom; then she pushed the cart up the aisle to finish her shopping. She was curious, but she knew that eventually she'd find out what was going on between Tom and Rosalie. She couldn't wait to tell her husband about this!

Rosalie and Tom both spoke at once then stopped abruptly and Rosalie giggled. "You first," she said.

"I was just going to say that I'm glad to run into you because I just tried calling you."

Oh no! Rosalie thought. She didn't want Tom to know how much her family disapproved of him and if they'd said anything to him, he might not want anything more to do with her. "Oh Tom! I hope no one was rude to you when you called?" Her brow was creased with worry.

"Huh? No. Nobody answered, actually." Rosalie visibly relaxed at his response and he wondered what that was about. His eyebrow rose quizzically as he asked, "Is there something wrong, Rosalie?"

"No. Well. I mean. Do you think we could talk about it later, Tom?" she asked. "Could I come and visit you later? Or tomorrow or something?"

"Sure. You can come whenever you like. If you wanted to come later today, that would be good." *Please come today!* he silently pleaded with her.

"Great! I'll come later today then," she told him.

Tom gave her directions to where they were staying and then told her he'd better catch up with his mother. Just before they parted ways, Rosalie asked, "Tom, could you do me a favor?"

"Sure. What is it?"

"Could you not try to call me again today? I'll explain later, okay?"

"Okay. But you'll come over later, right?"

"Absolutely," she said as she drew an imaginary cross over her heart and smiled at him. He smiled in return then left to find his mother.

By the time Tom and his mother came out of the store, Rosalie was nowhere in sight (and Tom looked). They loaded up the car and climbed inside. Mr. Connor put the car in drive and drove out of the parking lot then turned north toward the cottage where they would be staying.

Tom was quiet on the drive, looking out the window. Mrs. Connor was all smiles and she reached over and squeezed Mr. Connor's thigh. He looked over at her, confused, and she just nodded at Tom in the back seat and held her finger to her lips – silently letting him know she would tell him later. He smiled and glanced at Tom in the rearview mirror. He couldn't imagine what his wife was all smiles about, but he guessed he'd find out soon enough.

Once they were settled at the cottage and everything had been brought in from the car and unpacked, Mr. Connor sent Tom out to gather up some kindling and stack it near the fire pit in case they wanted to have a fire later. Once Tom was out of the house, he turned to his wife and said, "Okay, spill it."

She was near to bursting by that time and it all came out in a rush. "We were in the grocery store and a *girl* came

running up to *our Tom* and he was so cute – he was embarrassed and everything – and I think the girl has a crush on him and that he has a crush on the girl, too, and isn't that wonderful? And she's so pretty! Her name is Rosalie and I told her she should come and visit us here and I really, *really* hope that she will! You should have seen!"

Mr. Connor laughed at his wife's enthusiasm as she rambled on and on about the girl, Rosalie. When she'd gotten it all out of her system, she just stood there with emotions running around on her face. At one point, he thought she might cry. He took her in his arms and hugged her saying, "There, there, now. Don't go crying on me. What would Tom think if he knew you were all in a tizzy because he's interested in a girl? Let's not embarrass the boy!"

Mrs. Connor stepped out of his embrace and playfully smacked him on the arm. "Oh you! I'm just happy, that's all. It's so nice to see Tom with a new friend."

"Yes. It is," Mr. Connor agreed. "I'll look forward to meeting this Rosalie who, apparently, has a crush on my boy. In the meantime, I think I'll go pull out the fishing gear and get it ready for tomorrow."

* * * *

Rosalie did come to the cottage later that day. She borrowed her sister's car, telling her sister that she was invited to a party on the other side of the lake. It never occurred to her sister that Rosalie had never been invited to a party at the lake before, so she handed over the keys to her car without even questioning it.

When Rosalie arrived at Tom's cottage, Mrs. Connor was in the kitchen getting food ready to be cooked for supper. She answered Rosalie's knock at the door and invited the girl inside, explaining that Tom and his father were out by the lake getting their fishing gear ready for the next morning when they would be going out on the lake. She asked if Rosalie would like

to join them for supper and Rosalie said yes, thank you, she would like that very much.

Rosalie asked Mrs. Connor if there was anything she could do to help and Mrs. Connor set her to work shucking corn. They talked as they worked; their conversation awkward at first, but Mrs. Connor soon set Rosalie at ease. She told Rosalie the story of the day Tom first came to live with them. She got a little misty-eyed at the memory of that day. She explained to Rosalie that she and Mr. Connor had been so afraid that Tom wouldn't like them and how this shy, polite boy had soon come to be their son as if he'd been born to them. Soon, Rosalie and Mrs. Connor were chatting and laughing like old friends and this is how Tom found them when he came in to ask his mother if she was ready for him to light the grill.

"Rosalie! Hi!" Tom exclaimed with surprise at finding her in the kitchen. A warm flood of joy washed over him at seeing her there and he suddenly felt awkward in his own skin.

"Hi Tom," Rosalie replied shyly and smiled up at him, "I was just helping your mother. She invited me to stay for dinner."

"Oh. That's great! Thanks, mom," he said as he walked over to kiss his mother's cheek before going to the sink to wash up.

"It's no problem, dear. Rosalie is welcome any time." She smiled at Rosalie then said, "I think we're about ready here, aren't we Rosalie? Why don't you kids go on outside and take those," she said, indicating a stack of plates and silverware that were on the kitchen counter. "Go ahead and fire up the grill, Tom. I'll be out in a bit and we can get things cooking."

Tom dried his hands on a kitchen towel then he and Rosalie picked up the plates and silverware and Rosalie followed him through the cottage and out the door. As Tom and Rosalie walked over to the picnic table and set the dinnerware down, Mr. Connor looked up from his tackle box and smiled when he saw the pretty young girl that had come

outside with Tom. He set his gear down and walked over to the table.

"Well who have we got here, Tom? Aren't you going to introduce your old man to your friend?" He winked conspiratorially at Rosalie and she blushed.

"Um... Rosalie, this is my dad. Dad, this is my friend, Rosalie," Tom said, somewhat embarrassed to meet his father's eyes.

"It's nice to meet you Mr. Connor," Rosalie said. Mr. Connor nodded and smiled before saying, "It's very nice to meet you, too, Rosalie," he said and gave Tom's shoulder an encouraging squeeze.

After the introductions had been made, Mr. Connor went back to his tackle box. After putting the fishing gear away, he went inside to get washed up. He passed his wife on his way in and she was smiling from ear to ear as she walked past him and wiggled her eyebrows at him. He chuckled at her behavior and continued inside.

After the food has been prepared, they ate at the picnic table overlooking the lake. Tom could tell that his parents liked Rosalie right away and he was glad, because he liked her too. With the help of the Connors, Tom and Rosalie quickly overcame their initial shyness with each other and the meal was filled with lively conversation and laughter. When everyone was finished eating, Tom and Rosalie volunteered to clean up. As the two of them began clearing the table, Mr. Connor announced that he was going to take his lovely wife for a stroll on the beach. Tom nodded his acknowledgement and headed toward the house, his arms piled with dishes and leftovers. Rosalie stood gathering items from the table and watched Mr. and Mrs. Connor as they walked across the yard, hand in hand, headed toward the beach. She thought it was sweet – and wonderful – that the Connors had such genuine affection for each other. She wondered if there had ever been a time when her own parents had felt that way about one another. If they had, she certainly didn't remember it. She sighed then turned

to go inside, her hands full of silverware and plastic cups.

Rosalie found Tom in the kitchen filling the sink with sudsy dishwater. He looked over his shoulder and smiled at her as she came into the room. Turning off the faucet, he turned and took the dishes from Rosalie to set them on the counter near the sink. Tom grabbed a wet dishcloth and the two of them went back outside to finish clearing the picnic table and wipe down the plastic table cloth that covered it. Rosalie stood off to the side as Tom wiped the table. She could see the Connors down on the beach, still holding hands as they walked along the water's edge. She told Tom that she thought him lucky to have such nice parents and told him that she wished her own parents were like his. Tom looked up from what he was doing to look at her and saw that Rosalie was looking at his parents down on the beach as she spoke. He followed her gaze and saw his parents as they stopped walking and briefly kissed. He blushed and went back to wiping the table.

"Your parents are so cute!" Rosalie gushed as she saw them kiss. "I really like your parents, Tom."

"I'm glad," Tom replied. "I can tell they really like you, too."

"Do you think so?" She asked hopefully; she really wanted them to like her.

"Absolutely. But then, what's not to like?" He finished cleaning the table and led the way back to the cottage. Holding the door for Rosalie because her hands were full, Tom waited for her to go in then followed her inside. Once back in the kitchen they set everything down on the table. Tom pulled out a box of plastic wrap and they wrapped the leftovers and put them in the refrigerator.

Once all the food had been put away, Tom picked up a dishtowel and said, "I wash, you dry?"

Rosalie smiled and took the towel. "Sure."

Tom started washing and rinsing the dishes and one by one handed them to Rosalie for drying. They were silent for a few minutes, each lost in their own thoughts, until Rosalie said,

"I really do think your parents are great. They're so warm and inviting. Unlike *my* parents. My parents are so stuffy and snobbish. They're not friendly like your parents, either. Your parents seem so genuine and down to earth, while my parents are so self-absorbed and pretentious. They care more about what people think than how people feel. Honestly, I don't know how I ended up in my family – I've never felt like I was truly a part of it."

Tom stopped washing the dishes and turned toward her. He looked down at her, his head cocked to one side, quietly studying her.

"What?" she asked when she realized he was watching her.

"Nothing," Tom said. "I'm just looking at you. Tell me what you meant just now, about not feeling like a part of your family."

She looked down at the plate she was drying and after a moment she said, "It's just that I'm nothing like them. My family, I mean. My parents and my sisters are so into appearances and how they look and dress; the labels they wear and who their friends are... and I'm not like that. Obviously, I'm not concerned with how I dress," she said and indicated the shorts and T-shirt she was wearing. "I'm not popular like my sisters are... I'm not beautiful like my sisters are..."

Tom stopped her there, "You're wrong, Rosalie," he said.

She looked up from the plate in her hands and turned toward him. Looking up at him she asked, "What do you mean?"

"I mean, you may not be blonde like your sisters, but you're just as beautiful – if not more beautiful – than any of them." Tom felt color rise into his cheeks as he realized what he was saying. He broke eye contact and turned away from her, bringing his attention back to the sink. He cleared his throat and said, "I mean... well... what does it matter if you're not as popular as your sisters? Popularity isn't everything. Besides, it's

good to be different sometimes. It means you're your own person. You're capable of independent thought. You're not just a follower." He chuckled and went on, "At least that's what my parents always tell me." He glanced over at her and saw her smiling. "I know, it's pretty lame advice, right? It sucks being different."

"It sure does!" she agreed and they both laughed.

Tom finished washing the last of the dishes and pulled the plug from the sink. He started to put away the dishes that Rosalie had dried and stacked on the counter while she finished drying the last few dishes he'd rinsed. When she finished, she dried her hands on the towel and handed Tom the last two glasses she'd just dried and he put them in the cupboard with everything else.

As Tom looked around the kitchen and made sure everything had been put away, Rosalie said, "Tom?"

He turned and looked at her questioningly and she said, "There's something I need to tell you."

As he stood looking at her, waiting, she pulled out a chair from under the table and indicated that he should sit, so he did. Rosalie pulled out a second chair and sat down next to him and turned so she was facing him.

"Remember at the store earlier? When I asked you not to try calling me again?" she asked and he nodded so she went on, "I need to explain."

She looked uncomfortable and hesitated so Tom asked, "What is it?"

"I don't know how to say this, so I'm just going to say it," she said and drew in a slow breath before continuing. "Remember that day you walked me home? The day I gave you my number?"

Tom nodded again as the number he'd memorized popped into his head and he thought of the faded and battered slip of paper he still had in his pocket. He looked at her expectantly, waiting for her to continue.

"Well my mother saw me write down the number and

give it to you and when I went inside the house, she let me know in no uncertain terms that she was appalled that *her* daughter would be fraternizing with the likes of you..." Tom sat up straighter in his chair and both hurt and anger flashed in his eyes. Rosalie put out her hand and laid it on his arm, "...wait Tom, Please! Let me finish, okay?" He sat back a bit and nodded, his eyes narrowed and looking wary.

"She told me that there was no way she was going to allow me to be friends with someone *like you...*" she said gently and his eyes flashed again. She squeezed his arm and went on, "She forbade me to be friends with you, Tom. And at dinner, she told my father what she'd seen and then my father gave me a lecture all through dinner about the type of people I was expected to be friends with and how I should think about how it would look to *their* friends if I were to be seen with the 'wrong' kind of boy. He told me I was expected to live up to the family's reputation and that there were lots of nice boys with the 'proper' background and family for me to be friends with and he expected me to remember that..."

Tom shifted in his chair. His emotions were flying across his face, but he kept his eyes locked on hers as she spoke. She held onto his arm as she continued to speak, "And then *after* dinner, my sisters – you know, the twins? They called me into their room and told me to stop trying to get attention by playing with 'trash' and went on and on about how I should try being more like them, because I could have a rich boy if I wanted – I just needed to dress better and wear a little more makeup and stuff like that. They offered to fix me up with the younger brothers of some of their friends so that I could have more of a social presence."

Her eyes pleaded with him as she finished, "So, that's why I asked you not to try to call me again. I was afraid one of them might answer the phone."

His eyes were narrowed and his back was rigid. Rosalie could tell he was angry as he breathed through his nose making his nostrils flare. After a moment, he spoke. "And what did

you say in response to them? When they said all those things? Is that how *you* feel, too? I mean, about me? Is that how *you* feel? Are you sorry you gave me your number?"

She shook her head and told him, "No. I mean, I agreed with everything they said..." The anger in Tom's eyes instantly turned to hurt. She saw it happen in a flash. His rigid posture slumped forward and he suddenly looked defeated. He broke eye contact and looked down at the table as she hurriedly went on, "...but not because I thought they were right, Tom! Not because I agreed with any of it! I only told them what they wanted to hear because I know them and I know that if I'd argued with them, it would have made things worse for me – and... and... because I like you, Tom."

He looked up at her then. She smiled tenderly at him and said, "I mean it Tom. Remember when I said before how I don't feel like I'm one of them? Well I'm not. I don't feel like they do about most things. I like you, Tom, and I don't care what they think because I want to be friends with you. That is, if you want to be friends with me – knowing that my family disapproves of you. I wouldn't blame you if..."

"I like you, too, Rosalie," Tom interrupted. He looked relieved as he said "Of course I want to be friends with you."

Rosalie smiled with relief and after giving his arm another quick squeeze, she brought her hands together in her lap. "Then you'd be okay knowing that I was lying to my family about us being friends? You wouldn't find that hurtful? You wouldn't think I was a rotten louse?"

He laughed and said, "*You* could never be a rotten louse! Besides, most people don't care for me – they have judgments and opinions of me even though they don't even know me – I know that. I'm used to it. So what if your family thinks I'm not good enough? As long as you think I am, that's all that matters."

She let out a big sigh of relief and said, "Great! I'm so relieved! I thought for sure you would hate me!"

"Never," Tom said solemnly, then he broke into a wide

smile. "Come on, let's go outside." They got up and went outside just as Tom's parents were heading back from the beach.

CHAPTER 4

By the time school started again, Tom and Rosalie were the best of friends – having worked around Rosalie’s family, as it were. They were seniors now, which meant that the twins were no longer in school to see who Rosalie hung out with. The biggest surprise to both of them when school started back up was that finally, they had a class together. After all those years in the same school, but never in the same class, they finally had a class together. It was only one, but they were delighted. They also started sharing each other’s locker so that after just a few weeks, you couldn’t tell whose locker was whose.

Tom walked Rosalie to most of her classes throughout the day and they spent every minute possible together while at school. After school, they walked home together as far as the corner before going their separate ways. Tom never called Rosalie but she called him, quite often, when no one was around. They also did homework together at least a couple nights each week. Sometimes they would meet at the library and sometimes Rosalie would go to Tom’s house. The Connors were always happy to see her – even though Tom had explained to them at the very beginning how Rosalie’s parents disapproved of her being friends with him. The Connors had been very understanding and accepting of the relationship as it was, secret or not. They were just happy to see Tom so happy. And they truly did care for Rosalie and thought she was a wonderful girl.

As the school year went on, Tom and Rosalie were practically inseparable. They spent more time with each other than either of them had ever spent with anyone else. But still, they were just friends. There was never any talk of romance between them. Although Tom had confided to his father that he thought he was in love with Rosalie, he never voiced this to her. Rosalie, too, had strong feelings for Tom, but she never voiced them either. They contented themselves with being

friends, neither of them wanting to rock the boat by professing feelings that the other might not share.

When spring rolled around, the entire school was abuzz about the upcoming prom. Rosalie secretly wished Tom would ask her to go to the prom – even if it was just as friends. Tom, on the other hand, really wanted to ask Rosalie to the prom *as a date*, however, he knew that even if Rosalie accepted, her parents would never allow her to go to the prom with *him*. The day tickets to the prom went on sale, as Tom and Rosalie were walking home from school, Tom brought the subject up.

“Rosalie, I’ve been thinking about prom,” he said matter-of-factly.

Rosalie’s heart leapt and started pounding in her chest as she nonchalantly replied, “Oh?”

“Yes,” Tom said. “And while I think it would be great if you and I went together – just as friends, of course,” he clarified, in case she might think he presumed it would be a date, “But I just don’t think we can.”

Her heart dropped and again she said, “Oh.”

Tom went on, “I mean, even if I asked you to go and you said yes, your parents would never approve and you know you’d have to tell them who you were going with, wouldn’t you?”

He was right. She hadn’t even considered that part of the equation. “Yes. You’re right. They absolutely would want to know AND they would make a big fuss and have to take pictures and everything.” She felt an overwhelming disappointment at the realization that she would never be able to go to prom with Tom.

“Right. That’s what I thought,” he said thoughtfully.

Tom stopped walking and Rosalie stopped too. She turned around and looked at him. “What?” She asked when she saw the sly smile on his face.

“So, I was thinking...” he said, “...what if we did something else, instead? I mean, assuming you’re not going to prom with someone else, that is?”

"No. You know I'm not," she said and he grinned in response.

"Okay," he said, "then how about if I plan something special for us to do that night? Something different, I mean. You could say you're going to the library or something."

"Did you have something particular in mind?" she asked.

"Maybe," he teased. "I'll have to put some thought into it and let you know."

"Okay, it's a date!" she said enthusiastically before blushing. "Um, I mean... well, you know what I mean!" She whirled around, embarrassed, and began walking away.

Tom was confused. *What did I say? Why is she acting like that?* He went to catch up and fell back into step beside her. Neither of them spoke until they neared the corner where they would say goodbye.

"I'm sorry if I hurt your feelings Rosalie," Tom said quietly.

"What?" she said, confused. "What are you talking about? You didn't hurt my feelings."

"Well I wasn't sure, the way you acted back there I just thought..."

"No, Tom. I should be the one apologizing. I don't know what came over me back there. You didn't hurt my feelings. You didn't do or say anything wrong. On the contrary, I think it's really sweet of you to want to do something special for me because I'm not going to prom." She had decided he must feel sorry for her because she didn't have a date for prom.

"Rosalie," Tom said and reached out and took hold of her arm and turned her to face him. "Do you think I wanted us to do something special because I feel sorry for you or something? Do you think it's because I don't think you can get a date to the prom? Because it's not."

"Then why..." she started but he stopped her.

"It's because I really want to go to prom..." he said, "... with YOU. Not as friends, but as a *couple*." He looked her

straight in the eye when he said this – and he didn't blush. "Rosalie, I like you. I like you *a lot*. More than just as friends. But I also know your parents would never let you go to prom with me. So I want to do something else. Something special that you will always remember. I want you to look back at your high school days and always remember *me*."

"Oh Tom!" She squealed. "You big dope! How could I ever forget you? You're my best friend! You're my... my... *everything* friend! You're the only one I would ever want to go to prom with! And yes, I would want to go to prom with you *as my date*."

Tom was stunned. He didn't know what to say. He just stood there staring at her, disbelieving. She smiled widely and threw her arms around him and hugged him. He hugged her back and they both started laughing.

"I'm so relieved!" he said.

"So am I! It's about time," she said and let go of him. Her face was lit with happiness as she reached out and took Tom's hand and they walked the rest of the way to the corner holding hands.

When they reached the corner, they stopped. Tom really wanted to kiss Rosalie right then and there, but he was embarrassed. Besides that, he'd never kissed a girl before. So they just stood there looking at each other. Rosalie's face was alight and she wore the biggest, brightest smile Tom had ever seen on her face until that moment. She still held his hand as she stood looking up into his face. Suddenly, she went up on her toes and planted a light kiss on his lips. Then she let go of his hand, stepped back and told Tom she would see him tomorrow, then turned and hurried across the street toward home. As Tom stood there, shocked that she'd kissed him, she turned and waved. In a daze, he lifted his hand in return then watched her walk down the street. When he realized he still had his hand held up in a frozen wave, he sheepishly lowered it and turned for home, feeling like his whole world had changed. It was as if, suddenly, colors were brighter, birds

sounded sweeter, and he felt reborn somehow. Tom was in love!

* * * *

Rosalie walked the rest of the way home on cloud nine. She let herself into the house and mounted the stairs, headed straight for her room. Her mother stopped her when she was halfway up the stairs and asked her when they would be going shopping. Confused, Rosalie turned and looked down at her mother and asked, "Shopping? What for?"

"A prom dress, of course," her mother replied.

"I don't need a prom dress, mother. I haven't been asked to the prom."

"That's just what I was afraid of," her mother said disdainfully. "Why can't you ever try Rosalie, just a little bit? I can hardly believe that you're even a part of this family sometimes! Your sisters *always* had their choice of suitors for prom. But you - *you can't even get one date!*"

"I don't even want to go to prom, mother," Rosalie said patiently.

"It has nothing to do with whether you *want* to go. I mean, seriously! How would it look if *my* daughter didn't go to prom?"

"How would it LOOK? I can't believe you, mother!" Rosalie fumed.

"It's just a good thing I was prepared for this," her mother said. "Your father and I have taken it upon ourselves to find you an appropriate date."

"What are you talking about?" Rosalie demanded. "I am NOT going to the prom!"

"Oh yes you are, young lady! You're going to go with the son of one of your father's business associates. He's a handsome young man from a good family in Smith Falls. He will make you look good in front of your classmates."

"You mean he'll make YOU look good in front of your

so-called friends," Rosalie retorted.

"Think what you will Rosalie, but you ARE going to the prom so you may as well go shopping and let me help you pick out a dress."

"Mother, I am not going shopping because I am not going to the prom."

"Okay. Suit yourself. I'll just have to buy the dress myself. Because you ARE going. It's all arranged."

Rosalie was infuriated, but she calmly and deliberately walked down the stairs until she was eye-to-eye with her mother. She locked eyes with her mother and calmly said, "Mother, I do not want to go to prom with a boy that I have never even met. If you force me to go, then as soon as I get there I will simply excuse myself to the ladies' room and leave and not come back. How will THAT look to your precious friends?"

Her mother's face turned red with rage and she opened her mouth to speak, but before she had a chance to say another word, Rosalie turned and calmly walked back up the stairs. Her mother's angry words followed her up the staircase and down the hallway, but Rosalie blocked them out and kept walking. She entered her bedroom and slammed the door behind her. She flipped on the stereo and turned up the volume then went to her closet and pulled her diary from its hiding place. She flopped down on her stomach onto the bed, opened her diary and began writing.

How could they? How could they fix me up on a blind date for PROM? She was humiliated and hurt and angry. She poured her anger out on the pages of her diary until she felt better. When she finished venting, she began to write about Tom. She wanted to record every word he'd said to her on the corner that day. As she recounted events on paper, her anger dissipated and her heart felt lightened again. She glanced at the clock on her nightstand. Could it be possible that it had been barely an hour ago that she and Tom had stood on the corner? Since she'd brazenly kissed him? She sighed at the memory and

kept writing, adding to so many other pages that she'd filled in the preceding months with her secret feelings for Tom. Now she knew he shared those feelings! She'd never felt this happy in her entire life!

An hour later, as she lay there daydreaming and chewing on the cap of her pen, there was a knock at the door. She hastily shoved her diary under the bed pillows and said, "Come in." The door opened to reveal her father who stepped into the room.

"It's time to come down to dinner Rosalie. Apparently, your mother laid down with a headache and won't be joining us."

Rosalie got up from the bed and told her father she'd be right down then she went into her bathroom and washed her hands. When she came out, her father was gone. She hid her diary away then went downstairs where she found her father in the dining room sitting in his usual chair at the head of the table, reading the newspaper. Rosalie pulled out her chair and sat down. While she and her sisters had all had nannies when they were young, her parents had never employed a household staff. They did, however, have a cook who came in every day – she also did the laundry and the grocery shopping – and a cleaning woman who came in a couple of times a week. There was also a gardener who took care of the yard in the summer.

Rosalie served herself from the dinner already spread on the table and began to eat. Her father put down his newspaper and did the same. They ate in silence for a few minutes and then her father said, "Cook tells me your mother seemed pretty angry when she went to lie down. Do you know what that was about?"

Rosalie swallowed, took a sip of her milk and wiped her mouth with her napkin. "Yes, actually, I do know what that was about." She pushed her food around on her plate as she spoke, "She's angry because I refused to go to prom with someone I've never even met before just so she won't be

embarrassed by having a daughter who wasn't asked to her senior prom."

"Ah. I see."

"And I still refuse. This isn't even about *her*! It's my prom, not hers, and I didn't even want to go to begin with." She glanced at her father. His elbows were on the table and his fingers were steepled in front of him as he stared at his fingers bending and straightening, bending and straightening. Rosalie knew this was her father's habit when he was thinking and mulling things over. She figured she was about to get another lecture, but when her father spoke it wasn't a lecture – yet.

"I suppose we could arrange a meeting beforehand – invite the boy and his parents for dinner one evening so you could get to know him a bit? His father tells me he's a fine, upstanding young man. His father is an old friend of mine from my own school days, you know. A very successful man – and rich – from a prominent family. You could do worse than to date a boy like that."

Rosalie was beginning to lose her temper but she reined it in and decided to try using logic instead as she responded, "Of course his father would say he's 'a fine, upstanding young man!' What do you expect he would say? *My son is such a loser he can't get a date on his own so I'm sure he'd be thrilled to take your ugly daughter on a date?* And besides, even fine, upstanding – and rich – young men from prominent families can also be rapists and serial killers. Just look at William Kennedy Smith and Herbert Baumeister." She feared she was pushing her luck, but she continued on, "Honestly, father, I really have no interest in going to the prom and I don't know why mother has to make it all about *her*. I'm sure your friend's son is a perfectly nice guy, but I'm not interested in a blind date – especially not for something like the prom."

Her father still sat looking at his steepled fingers without responding. Rosalie sat looking down at the now-cold food on her plate and they were both silent. She could hear the ticking of the clock on the mantel, *tick tock tick tock*, as she

waited for the lecture that was sure to come. After what seemed to Rosalie to be about twenty minutes, her father looked up and pulled his elbows off the table. He looked at her and cleared his throat. She turned to look at him and then he spoke.

“I can see your point, Rosalie, and I agree with you. I was under the impression – one given me by your mother, of course – that you would’ve been heartbroken not to attend your senior prom. Your mother led me to believe that your disappointment would be severe should you not be asked to prom and that’s why I agreed to help find an appropriate date. I can see now that the whole thing had nothing to do with you – or with the truth. I will speak to your mother about this later. Now let’s finish dinner.”

Rosalie was so happy and relieved that she wanted to jump out of her chair and give her father a big hug, but she knew he would disapprove of such a display of affection, so instead she said, “Oh thank you, Father!” He nodded in response and they both picked up their forks and began eating their cold dinner.

The following day, Rosalie told Tom about the whole episode. He was both appalled and saddened that Rosalie’s mother would try to force her to go on a blind date to the prom *and* that her mother would be so selfish and indifferent to Rosalie’s feelings. He was glad however, that Rosalie’s father had listened to his daughter and taken her feelings into consideration. Tom was also glad (and relieved) that Rosalie wouldn’t be going to prom with another guy – especially a *rich* guy. There was no way Tom could compete with that and he knew it. He resolved to make prom night such a special night for Rosalie that she would never look back and regret not having been asked to prom. He wanted her to always remember that once, someone had thought the world of her. He decided to discuss it with his parents that night at dinner. He was sure they would help him plan something spectacular for Rosalie.

CHAPTER 5

When the day of prom arrived, Rosalie was frustrated that Tom hadn't given her one clue about what he had planned for them that night. She tried to cajole and wheedle Tom into giving something away but he stood firm and didn't let a single thing slip. As they walked home from school she gave it one last try.

"I was wondering, Tom, how should I dress tonight?"

Surely he would at least have to tell her that much and when he did she might be able to figure out what he had planned by what he told her to wear. But Rosalie's plan didn't pan out. Tom simply glanced over at her and nonchalantly said, "What you've got on is fine."

"Ooo – you!" Rosalie exclaimed. Tom just smiled and kept walking, looking like the cat that ate the canary. Suddenly, Rosalie squealed and jumped behind him. He kept walking but turned around, walking backwards, to look at her and ask what was up. She'd stopped several feet back and gone down on her knee to tie her shoe.

"Shhh! Turn around and keep walking! Pretend you don't know me!"

Tom did as he was told. When he turned back around, a car pulled up to the curb and he saw Rosalie's mother behind the wheel. He kept walking and didn't look back as he heard the horn honk and Rosalie's mother shout, "Rosalie! Get in the car young lady! Right now!"

Oh crap! Tom thought and kept walking.

Rosalie opened the car door and got inside. Before she could close the door behind her, her mother was already reprimanding her.

"Rosalie! Why were you talking to that *awful* boy?"

Acting nonplussed, Rosalie answered, "What boy, mother?"

"*That* boy!" her mother screeched.

"I wasn't talking to any boy, mother. I don't know who

you mean."

"Oh yes you do! You were talking to that *weird* boy – the one from the cemetery!"

"Oh. You mean Tom Hopkins?"

"YES! I mean HIM!" her mother practically screamed at her.

"I wasn't talking to him, mother," Rosalie replied calmly.

"Yes you were! I saw him walking backwards and you were talking to him," her mother accused, her eyes narrow with suspicion.

Rosalie waved her hand in a dismissive manner and said, "Well I wasn't *really* talking to him. He was just walking along ahead of me and turned around to ask me if I knew what time it was – so I told him. Thanks for picking me up," she said, trying to change the subject.

Her mother considered what Rosalie had said and with eyes still narrowed she asked, "Why would he want to know what time it is? Doesn't he have a watch?"

"I have no idea, mother. Maybe he's late for work or something. What's for dinner?"

Her mother relaxed and put the car in gear then slowly pulled away from the curb. Since she'd missed her turn at their street when she'd seen Rosalie talking to Tom, they had to circle around the block to get home. As she drove she said, "You'll be on your own for dinner tonight, don't you remember? Your father and I are going to that charity function and I'm on the committee, which means I have to go early and also stay late to supervise the cleanup. I thought I told you this already?"

"Oh yeah. I guess I just forgot," Rosalie lied. She knew full well her parents had plans tonight and she couldn't be happier about it. It meant she could go out on her date with Tom and be back home and in bed before her parents ever got home. She'd been ecstatic when her mother first told her about it.

“And I gave Cook the night off – since your father and I won’t be home for dinner – which means you’ll have to fend for yourself.” She pulled into the driveway and parked then they both got out of the car and went into the house. “I’m off to shower and get ready,” she told Rosalie. “Your father should be home any time now.”

“Okay.”

Rosalie was nearly bursting with excitement but she acted as if she were bored by the whole thing. With cook out of the house, she wouldn’t even have to lie to anyone in order to get out of the house tonight. Her mother headed upstairs and Rosalie followed, feeling exhilarated, and took her things to her room. An hour later, she heard her father come up the stairs and go into her parents’ room so she went down to the kitchen to wait. Her hair was thrown up in a sloppy ponytail and she’d put on sweats to make it look like her only plan was to watch TV all night. Rosalie sat in the kitchen until she heard her mother’s heels clicking down the hallway headed in her direction then she jumped up and began opening and closing cupboards, rooting around in the refrigerator and pulling things out as she went, making it appear as though she was putting together something for her dinner.

Her mother came into the kitchen all coiffed and perfumed, looking like a movie star, and announced, “We’ll be leaving in a couple of minutes, Rosalie. Be sure you lock up before you go to bed and leave a couple of lights on for us. The event ends at midnight and then I’ll have to stay around and supervise for a while, so I don’t expect we’ll be home before one o’clock or so.”

“Okay. Have a good time,” Rosalie said, her head stuck inside the refrigerator. Her mother blew out a huff and walked out of the room. Rosalie stood up and listened as her parents gathered their things and went out the front door. She ran to the window and watched as they backed out of the driveway and once they were gone she started putting away all of the things she’d pulled out and scattered across the counter. When

she was finished cleaning up, she ran upstairs to her room and changed back into her clothes. She went in the bathroom and took her hair down and brushed it, she applied some lip gloss and a bit of fresh mascara and then headed for the stairs. She stopped long enough to switch on her bedroom light so she wouldn’t come home to a dark room when she got back. She also switched on a couple other lights downstairs and turned on the TV so it would look like someone was home, then she checked that all the doors were locked and that the outside porch lights were on. She let herself out the front door, locked it behind her and put her key in the pocket of her jeans, then started off to Tom’s house.

As she walked along, she thought about what Tom had said earlier that day – that what she had on was okay for their date tonight. She looked down at herself; she was wearing jeans, sneakers, a white t-shirt, and a gray cardigan. *Whatever we’re doing tonight, it can’t be very fancy*, she thought, somewhat disappointed. But she decided that whatever they were doing, they would be doing it together, and *that* was the important thing.

When she was a few houses away from Tom’s house, she did what she’d become accustomed to doing and started scanning the neighborhood to make sure there was no one around that might see her going to Tom’s house. Once, she’d seen one of the women from her mother’s bridge club walking her dog and heading straight for her. She’d stopped and spoken briefly with the woman and then continued on past Tom’s house and gone completely around the block and then back in order to avoid the woman seeing where she went. She certainly didn’t want anyone passing it on to her mother that she’d been seen going to Tom’s house. When she was sure there was no one around that might see her and tell her mother (or father), she did as she usually did and turned up Tom’s driveway and hurried around to the back door. She never went to the front door as that might leave her open to being seen while she stood on Tom’s front porch and waited for someone to answer the

door and let her inside.

Once at the back door, she knocked and waited. She could hear Mr. Connor whistling as he came from the front of the house through to the kitchen to open the back door for her. He greeted Rosalie warmly and let her inside. She stepped into the kitchen, which smelled faintly of cinnamon, and closed the door behind her. She looked past Mr. Connor but saw no sign of Tom.

Mr. Connor noticed Rosalie looking past him and told her, "Tom's not here, Rosalie. He's off getting everything ready for tonight. But don't worry. Mrs. Connor and I have been tasked with getting *you* ready for tonight." He smiled reassuringly and stepped to the hallway to call for his wife. When he came back he said, "Mrs. Connor will get you all fixed up and then we'll drive you to meet Tom."

Rosalie thanked him as Mrs. Connor came into the kitchen and exclaimed, "There you are! Come on now, let's get you upstairs!" Rosalie followed her out of the kitchen to the stairway. They went upstairs, Mrs. Connor leading the way. She led Rosalie down the hall to the guest bedroom and they went inside.

"I've been just about bursting with anticipation all day!" Mrs. Connor exclaimed.

"Me too!" Rosalie responded and they both laughed.

"Okay, are you ready?" Mrs. Connor asked with excitement and Rosalie nodded. "This is the first part of your surprise," Mrs. Connor said as she walked over to the closet. "I really do hope you like it!" she said as she opened the closet door to reveal an elegant tea-length dress in a dusty rose color hanging on the back of the door. She turned and looked expectantly at Rosalie who just stood there, staring, but didn't say a word. Mrs. Connor was crestfallen at Rosalie's silence.

"You don't like it," Mrs. Connor said flatly.

"No! Yes! I mean, it's beautiful!" Rosalie said when she found her voice. "Is it *for me*?" she asked.

"Of course it's for you!" Mrs. Connor said as her smile

returned. "When I saw the fabric in the store, I knew it would go perfectly with your hair color and complexion," she said as she took the dress down from the hook on the door. She held the dress up in front of Rosalie and was pleased by what she saw. "I knew I was right! It's perfect for your coloring! Now, I didn't know your exact size, but you and I are pretty similar in size so I went off my own measurements, taking it in a bit here and there, of course," she said and chuckled.

"Wait a minute," Rosalie said. "Do you mean you *made* this dress? *For me*?"

"I did," Mrs. Connor replied with pride. She hung the dress back up and as she turned back Rosalie was standing still, staring at the dress, and her eyes were brimming with tears. "Rosalie, what's wrong?" Mrs. Connor asked, concerned as tears began to roll down Rosalie's cheeks. "Rosalie, what is it?"

"It's...it's just that..." her voice hitched with emotion, "...no one has ever done anything so wonderful *for me*." She breathed out the last two words. Suddenly, she threw her arms around Mrs. Connor and hugged her tight exclaiming, "Thank you! Thank you!"

Mrs. Connor hugged the girl back and said simply, "You're welcome."

Just as suddenly as she'd thrown her arms around the woman, Rosalie abruptly pulled away and began apologizing. "I'm *so* sorry!" She said, then, "I shouldn't have been so familiar! I'm sorry."

Mrs. Connor reached out and touched the girl on the shoulder and said, "It was a *hug*, Rosalie. A hug is a good thing. You shouldn't be apologizing. You can hug me anytime you like." She smiled and went on, "And I promise to hug back. You know, you're the closest I've ever had to a daughter, and that hug really means a lot to me!"

"Really?" Rosalie asked, not quite believing. "I can't remember my mother ever hugging me. She would've had a fit if I'd hugged her like I just hugged you," she said quietly.

"Well, then, it's about time you got a nice, big hug!"

Mrs. Connor smiled and opened her arms to the girl and they embraced again. This time, tears filled Mrs. Connor's eyes. She held Rosalie for a few moments then stepped back and held her at arm's length saying, "Now before I leave you alone to try on the dress, there are just a few more things." She let go of Rosalie and walked to the dresser where she placed her hand on top of a white shoebox. "Here are your shoes, and here is a pair of pantyhose." She pointed to the package next to the shoebox, then she picked up a small black case that was also on the dresser. She walked back to Rosalie and said, "And I thought you might want to borrow these – but only if you want to, you don't have to if you don't like them." She opened the case and inside was a necklace of cut crystal beads and a pair of matching earrings. The light refracting off the beads sparkled in hues of pinks and blues.

"They're gorgeous!" Rosalie gasped. "I would love to wear them! It's so very generous of you!"

"Oh good!" Mrs. Connor exclaimed. "They were my mother's, and her mother's before her. I'd always hoped to pass them on to my own daughter one day," she said wistfully. "I'd be so pleased for you to wear them tonight."

"Thank you! I can't believe all of this!" Rosalie said. "It's like a fairy tale or something!"

"I'm sure Tom will be pleased to hear that you think so. He's really put a lot of effort into making this night really special for you. Now I better get out of here so you can change. I wasn't sure if you might need to shave your legs, so I left a new razor and some towels and everything you need on the counter in the bathroom. Call me when you've changed and we'll see if we need to make any quick alterations to the dress or not. And...if you wouldn't mind...I'd really love to help you with your hair and makeup. It's not often I have a girl in the house to fuss over!"

"That would be really great, Mrs. Connor. I really do appreciate all of this," Rosalie said as she swept her arm around the room.

Mrs. Connor smiled and nodded before leaving the room, closing the door behind her. When she was gone, Rosalie went to the shoebox and opened the lid. Inside was a pair of classic *peau de soie* pumps that had been dyed to perfectly match the dress. Rosalie took them out of the box and stood the three-inch heels on the floor. Luckily, she'd shaved her legs just that morning (just in case) in preparation for tonight. She quickly took off her clothes, folding them and putting them on the bed. She put on the pantyhose then took the dress from its hanger and slipped it over her head – the fabric felt so soft and smooth against her skin. She avoided looking in the mirror until she'd put on the pumps and the jewelry. When she turned and looked in the full-length mirror, she couldn't believe it. The dress fit perfectly! And the way it hung on her frame was so flattering to her figure that she almost thought she looked *beautiful*. The necklace sparkled and looked perfect with the neckline of the dress. Rosalie lifted her hair off her face so she could see the earrings sparkling on her earlobes. She smiled at herself and did a slow turn, trying to see herself from every angle. Then she went out into the hall and called downstairs to Mrs. Connor.

* * * *

Half an hour later, Mrs. Connor led the way downstairs where Mr. Connor waited to drive them to meet Tom. When he saw Rosalie, his face lit with a wide smile and he raved about how beautiful she looked. He told her she was going to knock Tom's socks off and this made Rosalie smile shyly and blush. Mr. Connor held the back door for the women and they all went outside to the car. He opened the back door of the car for Rosalie and she slid inside, filled with excitement and anticipation. The Connors refused to tell her where they were going. *It's a surprise*, they kept saying. So Rosalie just sat back and tried to quell her nerves as they backed out of the driveway and left to meet Tom.

She looked out the window and watched the neighborhood go by. She felt the car come to a stop and looked ahead to see that they were about to turn onto Main Street. She caught Mr. Connor's eye in the rearview mirror and he smiled (she could tell he was smiling by the way his eyes crinkled at the corners). She smiled back then turned to look out the window. As they drove through town, Rosalie saw a group of kids from school – all decked out for the prom – coming out of a restaurant and getting into a limo that was waiting at the curb. She looked down at herself and thought *tonight I look as pretty as any one of those girls! Tonight I feel like Cinderella!* And a smile spread across her face at the thought.

When Rosalie looked back out the window, she saw they were now headed out of town on Route 90 toward Smith Falls. Again, she wondered where they were taking her, but she didn't ask. She just sat back and tried to ignore the butterflies in her stomach. A short time later, the car slowed and she sat up straight and looked out to see that they were turning into the parking lot of Luigi's Ristorante. It wasn't a fancy place, but it was the best place in the area for Italian food. Even so, she felt a little overdressed for Luigi's.

There was a parking space near the front entrance but to Rosalie's surprise, Mr. Connor drove around to the back of the building and pulled up near a rear door and parked the car. She saw Tom's face appear in a small window at the back of the building. He waved before disappearing only to reappear seconds later opening the rear entrance door. Mr. Connor got out of the car and came around to open the door for Rosalie. He put out his hand to help her from the back seat, then tucked her hand under his bent elbow and escorted her toward Tom as if she were a bride and the butterflies in her stomach took flight again.

Tom stood standing just outside the door. *He looks SO handsome!* Rosalie thought. He was dressed in a classic black tuxedo, complete with cummerbund, bowtie, and shiny black rental shoes. In his hands was a small white box and on his face

was a huge smile. He shifted nervously from foot to foot as he watched her approach.

She's absolutely stunning! Tom thought as he watched Rosalie walk toward him. His stomach was rolling over with nervousness. As Rosalie and his father came near and stopped, his father stepped back and gave a short bow. He told Tom he'd be back to pick them up at 11:00, told them to have fun, and turned back toward the car where Mrs. Connor had gotten out and was coming toward them with her camera in hand.

Tom and Rosalie were standing looking at each other, smiling. Neither said a word until Tom remembered he was holding the box. He opened it and carefully took out the wrist corsage that was inside. It was made of delicate white baby roses and he said, "Roses for my beautiful Rosalie."

"Tom, they're beautiful! Thank you!" Rosalie gushed as she held out her hand so he could slip it onto her wrist. She was absolutely glowing with happiness. She truly did feel like Cinderella! She held up her hand to admire the corsage while Tom stood admiring her.

"Now turn this way you two," Mrs. Connor instructed. "We have to get some pictures! You both look so wonderful!" Tom and Rosalie did as instructed and after several poses and several pictures, Mr. Connor told his wife she had enough already and they should go home and let the kids enjoy their night. Mrs. Connor reluctantly agreed. She hugged Rosalie and whispered in her ear to have a wonderful time then, with tears in her eyes, she hugged Tom and told him how handsome he looked and how proud she was of him.

She walked back to the car wiping tears from her cheeks and got into the car where Mr. Connor was waiting. They both waved before Mr. Connor put the car in gear and they left Tom and Rosalie standing outside the building watching them go. After his parents were gone, Tom opened the door and held it for Rosalie. Once inside, he directed her down the back hallway, past the kitchen and toward Luigi's "banquet room." Rosalie felt a twinge of disappointment as

she remembered they were at Luigi's. She knew the banquet room was nothing special. It wasn't really big enough for a banquet – it was more of a private dining room with several large tables in it – but as she stepped inside she gasped in surprise and delight.

"Oh, Tom! It's wonderful!" Rosalie cried. Gone was the dingy room filled with banquet tables and in its place was a romantic starlit night. The ceiling was now covered in twinkling fairy lights that looked like a thousand stars. There was only one table in the room now – a table for two – and there was a backdrop of candelabras of varying sizes illuminating the area surrounding it. In the far corner of the room was another candelabra casting its glow to reveal a solo cellist who began to play slow, achingly romantic music. The rest of the room was in shadows and Rosalie could easily imagine being on a city rooftop or a balcony overlooking the countryside.

Tom led Rosalie to the table and pulled out a chair for her to sit. Once she was seated, he sat down opposite her. Tom thought how utterly prepossessing Rosalie looked in the candlelight; the way it shone on her hair. He'd always thought she was beautiful, but he'd never seen her like *this*. His heart pounded in his chest as she smiled at him and he realized that he truly was in love with Rosalie.

* * * *

It was a magical evening for both Tom and Rosalie. The dinner was delicious and the waiter who served it seemed to magically appear out of the dark each time something was needed or the next course was served. The music perfectly set the mood, going from quiet background ambiance during dinner to romantic dancing music after dessert was served and eaten.

Over dinner, Tom and Rosalie talked and laughed and talked some more. Afterward, Tom held her in his arms as they

danced – sometimes quietly conversing and laughing, but sometimes just content to hold each other close and sway to the music. And then they kissed, both feeling as if their hearts would explode with the intensity of it. Aside from the quick little kiss Rosalie had given him on the street that day, this was the first *real* kiss for either of them and although awkward at first, they soon relaxed into it. Needless to say, many more kisses followed.

As the evening wound to a close, they were both disappointed that it couldn't last longer. Mr. Connor picked them up, as promised, and drove them back to Tom's house where they dropped Mr. Connor off and picked up Rosalie's things (which Mrs. Connor had put into a tote bag for her). As Tom drove her home, Rosalie told him what a wonderful evening it had been and how special he'd made her feel. She sighed and said she felt like a princess and wished the feeling could never end.

As Tom pulled up to the curb in front of Rosalie's house, she scanned the house for any indication that her parents had somehow beaten her home, but there was none. Tom got out and opened her door for her, took the tote bag and threw it over his shoulder, then helped Rosalie out of the car. The two of them talked quietly as they headed up the front walk toward the house. When they reached the steps to the porch they stopped.

"This has been the most wonderful night of my life, Tom," Rosalie said. "Thank you so much for everything! And thank you for making me feel like a fairytale princess!" She stepped up on the bottom step and turned to face him; they were nearly eye-to-eye this way. She put her arms around his neck and gazed into his dark brown eyes then she leaned in to kiss him. They lost themselves, once again, in a kiss that made their hearts pound. Neither of them noticed the car that came down the street just then; it slowed in front of the house but didn't stop. As hopelessly lost as they were in each other at that moment, a bomb could have dropped and they wouldn't have

noticed. The occupant of the car, however, noticed them.

Tom felt himself begin to stiffen and reluctantly pulled away before Rosalie could feel his growing erection. "I suppose I'd better say good night and let you get inside before your parents get home," he said. "Thank you for making this a perfect night, Rosalie. I hate for it to end."

"Me too," she agreed. After one last, quick kiss, Rosalie took the tote bag from Tom's shoulder and they said their final goodnights. Tom watched as Rosalie climbed the remaining steps to the porch. She reached into the tote bag and fished her house key out of the pocket of her jeans then turned, smiled, and gave Tom a little wave before letting herself inside and closing the door behind her. Rosalie locked the door and leaned back against it hugging the tote bag to her chest, aglow with happiness. She tingled all over and she just wanted to stand still and relish it for a moment. When she heard the mantel clock chiming the quarter hour, she shook herself out of her reverie, slipped off her heels and ran lightly up the stairs and down the hall to her room.

Once inside her bedroom, Rosalie closed the door behind her and walked to the mirror where, dropping the bag at her feet, she stood admiring herself one last time. She touched her throat where Mrs. Connor's crystal necklace had been. Mrs. Connor had been right, the necklace and earrings had been the perfect touch. She smiled at her reflection, then she walked to the closet and carefully took off her dress. She put it on a hanger and hung it in the back of her closet. Although she couldn't remember a time when her mother had ever come near her closet, Rosalie felt better putting it far in the back, just to be on the safe side.

Peeling off her pantyhose, she tossed them into her laundry hamper. She put her high heels into the back of her closet then pulled out her pajamas and put them on. Going into the bathroom, she switched on the light and stood staring at her reflection in the mirror. It had been such a wonderful night! She hated to take her hair down because it meant the

night was truly over. As she pulled the pins from her hair and it tumbled down around her shoulders, she thought about Tom and how wonderful it was to kiss him. Having never kissed anyone else, she had nothing to compare it to, but she thought that she'd done alright and hoped that he'd enjoyed it as much as she had. Kissing Tom stirred things inside of her and made her tingle all over. She looked forward to kissing him again as soon as possible.

After washing her face and brushing her teeth, Rosalie went downstairs and turned off the TV and some of the lights she'd left on then returned to her room to record the magic of this night in her diary. She laid on her bed writing until well after midnight before hiding her diary away again and climbing into bed. She hugged her pillow close as she laid there thinking about Tom and fell asleep with a blissful smile on her face.

* * * *

Tom drove down Rosalie's street with the feel of her kisses still on his lips. He'd never been so utterly and fantastically happy in all of his life! He thought the evening had gone very well and that Rosalie had been pleased by his efforts. She'd looked so beautiful tonight and he couldn't wait to see the pictures his mother had taken. Even if he never got to have another date with Rosalie ever again, he would always have those photographs to remind him of the magical night he'd once spent with her.

As he pulled into his driveway, Tom saw his mother peeking out through the curtains on the back door. He smiled to himself knowing that his mother would want him to tell her *everything* about his night – which he planned to do, except he'd leave out the part about getting a boner when Rosalie kissed him goodnight. He parked the car in the garage, closed the garage door, and walked toward the house humming to himself. The back door opened before he even reached it and his mother stood holding it open for him.

“Thanks, mom,” Tom said as he came into the house. His mother was smiling from ear-to-ear and pulled out a kitchen chair and sat down, waiting expectantly.

Mr. Connor walked in just then and said, “I’m sorry, Tom. Your mother has been on pins and needles all night and refused to go to bed. I tried...”

Tom laughed and responded, “It’s okay, dad. I can’t wait to tell you both all about tonight!” He and his father both pulled out a chair and sat down then Tom told them (almost) everything about his night with Rosalie.

CHAPTER 6

The following morning, Rosalie’s mother received a phone call from one of her friends who’d happened to drive past the house the night before and seen Rosalie kissing Tom on the front steps. Rosalie’s mother was livid but she calmly and politely thanked her friend before hanging up the phone. She immediately went screaming up the stairs rousing Rosalie and demanding an explanation. Had she actually been kissing that *horrible* boy on their very own front stoop where the whole world could see? How could she have disgraced herself in this way? She demanded that Rosalie explain herself this very instant.

Rosalie very calmly told her mother that it was none of her business who she may or may not have been kissing on the front stoop or anywhere else, for that matter. This infuriated her mother even more and she continued to scream at Rosalie and voice her embarrassment and disgust that her daughter would do something like this to her. Rosalie sat calmly and quietly as her mother went through her rant and she didn’t say a word. Finally, in frustrated anger, her mother gave Rosalie an ultimatum: either Rosalie agree never to see that boy again, or once she graduated she would be put out of the house and disowned. Rosalie, very firmly, refused to stop seeing Tom.

When Rosalie told Tom what had happened, he begged her to go to her mother and apologize and tell her mother she wouldn’t see him again – but Rosalie refused. “But Rosalie,” Tom reasoned, “What if she actually kicks you out of the house? You need to tell her you won’t see me anymore!”

“No. I won’t tell her that!” Rosalie exclaimed resolutely. “Tom, I love you,” she blurted. “If my family can’t accept that, then I’ll gladly be disowned. I won’t stop seeing you and I don’t care if she does kick me out.”

Stunned, Tom just stared at her. Had she just told him that she *loved* him? “W-what did you just say?” Tom asked her.

"I said, I don't care if she does kick me out."

"Not that, what did you say *before* that?"

Rosalie looked at him, confused, and then it dawned on her. She blushed slightly as she realized that she'd just told Tom that she loved him. She reached out and took his hand and looked up at him then spoke softly, "I said I love you, Tom, and I mean it. I love you."

Tom's knees felt weak and a rush of heat flooded him as he said, "I love you too, Rosalie."

They stood staring into each other's eyes, their mutual proclamation filling them with sensations that neither of them had felt before. Neither of them spoke for several moments and then Tom told Rosalie that if she was absolutely sure about things, he knew that his parents would let her move in with them. Rosalie squeezed his hand and said yes, she was absolutely, positively, sure.

* * * *

Right after graduation, Rosalie's mother had lived up to her word and kicked her out of the house. Rosalie moved in with the Connors and soon thereafter, she and Tom got married. They continued to live with Tom's parents until they could afford a small apartment of their own. Rosalie got a job at the library – which made her extremely happy – and eventually, when old Ned died, Tom took over as caretaker at Oak Lawn. Tom and Rosalie moved into the caretaker's cottage adjacent to the cemetery where they lived quite happily together until the night of the accident that took Rosalie's life.

When Tom awakened from the coma, his parents were there to give him the bad news. He was inconsolable for weeks and stayed with his parents until he felt able to return to the cottage that he and Rosalie had shared for so many years. Tom was angry and grief-stricken that Rosalie's parents had buried her while he'd still been in a coma. They'd buried her without even having a funeral service. They hadn't even allowed his

parents to say goodbye. It wasn't fair! *He* was her *husband* and it should've been *his* decision how his wife would be buried. But because of Rosalie's parents' standing in the community, they'd been allowed to take Tom's wife from the hospital to quickly and quietly lay her to rest as if she were nothing – but she was *everything* to Tom, and now she was gone forever.

When Tom had first gotten out of the hospital, he'd gone to Rosalie's grave. What he found there saddened him. There was a mound of dirt with no marker; no flowers; nothing to show how loved Rosalie had been. This tore him apart. He had a grave blanket made with white roses to put over the mound then he ordered a tombstone etched with Rosalie's name – Rosalie *Hopkins* – and an inscription that read *Beloved Wife and Irreplaceable Friend*.

It was when the stone was being placed at Rosalie's grave (with Tom supervising installation) that Tom first heard the voices. *What a shame!* A woman's voice said. *She was such a lovely woman and so lucky to have such a devoted husband.* Another woman's voice added. Tom looked around, wondering where the voices had come from, as there were only men on the crew placing the stone. He'd seen no one else around that could have spoken so he wrote it off as his imagination and went back to watching the stone being installed.

Once the stone was in place and the workmen were gone, Tom stood beside the grave looking down at Rosalie's name and feeling lost and hopeless. That's when he heard a man's voice say, *So sorry for your loss, Tom. I know she loved you very much.* Tom whirled around, searching for the source of the voice.

"Who's there?" he called out. "Who said that?" He looked around but saw no one.

It's Mr. McCorkle, Tom, the voice said. Tom slowly turned away from Rosalie's grave and looked at the headstone that stood a few yards away. He thought he must be losing his mind. Andrew McCorkle had been buried at least three years before.

"Leave me alone you rotten kids! This isn't funny!" Tom shouted as he scanned the cemetery that surrounded him convinced that he was, once again, the target of harassing teenagers. When he heard no laughter and saw no one fleeing the scene, he turned back to Rosalie's grave, shaking with grief.

Poor Tom! a woman's voice sadly exclaimed.

"Who said that?" Tom demanded as he looked wildly around. "Who's there?"

Oh my! The woman's voice replied. *Can you really hear me, Tom?*

"Yes. I can hear you. Come out where I can *see* you!" Tom commanded. Then a chorus of voices erupted wanting to know if Tom could hear them too – and he could.

It took quite a while for Tom to get used to hearing the voices. At first, he thought himself crazy; thought he must be losing his mind because of his grief. But once the voices began to take turns, telling him who they were and giving him information to validate their claims, Tom began to believe that he truly was hearing the dead speak to him.

In the more than two years since that day, Tom has spent many hours talking to his charges. Most of them have wanted him to relay messages to their loved ones, and typically, after he does, he will hear them speak no more. There are some who are too scared to move on from this place and find out what happens next and Tom has long conversations with some of them about this fear that they hold onto; he tries to convince them to move on, to find peace – but some of them still remain afraid and are still here at Oak Lawn. Others, like the Martin brothers, seem to have no fear of moving on, but seem to want to spend time reliving the past instead of moving on. Still others have messages that Tom has been unable to deliver – because there's no one to deliver them to after the passage of time, or because their loved ones have moved away or are otherwise unreceptive to Tom's efforts to speak to them – and so they stay, hoping that one day their messages will be heard. There are also those like Mr. McCorkle who just like hanging

around and have no desire to move on.

In truth, Tom doesn't mind their company. Once he was able to get a handle on the craziness of it all, he came to like having the company. And then word started getting around town that the creepy weirdo "Tombstone Tom" (as the kids had taken to calling him when he took over for Ned) was claiming he could talk to the dead and this gave people a new reason to make fun of him – or be more creeped out by him – and he is ridiculed and laughed at even more now than before. Hearing the rumors really bothered his parents, too. They had already been worried enough about Tom after losing Rosalie but when he started hearing the voices they became worried for his sanity as well.

Although he tried to assure them that he was fine, Tom's parents were concerned that the loss of Rosalie had caused him to suffer some sort of mental breakdown. They asked him to let them send him for a mental evaluation, but he refused. He did, however, agree to go back to the hospital for more tests and scans to rule out any sort of brain swelling, tumor, or residual issues from the accident that might have been causing him to hallucinate. The doctors found nothing.

Tom had never lied to his parents and they both knew this, yet they didn't know what to make of Tom's claims that he could suddenly speak to the dead. The thing that finally convinced them to believe that Tom wasn't crazy was when Tom passed on a message from his mother's sister who had died as a young girl – long before Tom had come to Bright Creek – and Tom hadn't even known about her. He'd had no idea that his mother's sister was buried at Oak Lawn. It was that message Tom gave his mother from her sister that convinced Mrs. Connor to believe that Tom actually could speak to the dead. It wasn't difficult for her to convince her husband to believe it too.

No matter what people around town said about Tom, his parents never doubted him after that – and that was all that Tom needed. The fact that his parents still loved him and

trusted him was everything to Tom now that Rosalie was no longer with him. There was something that bothered him about the whole situation, though. The one thing that bothered him most about being able to speak with the dead was that Rosalie had never spoken to him. Was there nothing that she wanted to say to him? No message for her sisters or her parents? Even though Rosalie's parents had refused to have anything to do with her after she married Tom – and had refused to even meet Tom – her sisters had still communicated with Rosalie a few times over the years. Her sisters had never accepted that Rosalie was happy being married to Tom, and they'd tried to talk Rosalie into leaving him and coming back to the family, but Rosalie steadfastly refused. Even so, Tom knew that Rosalie had still loved her sisters.

It bothered Tom a lot at first, the fact that Rosalie had never spoken to him since she'd died, but Mr. McCorkle assured him it was because Rosalie had known how much Tom loved her and she'd known that Tom knew how much she loved him. There was nothing left unsaid between Rosalie and Tom because they'd always been open with each other about their feelings. Mr. McCorkle reasoned that Rosalie had no reason to stay on here at Oak Lawn and so she must have crossed over right away, unaware that she could have said goodbye to Tom had she wanted to, because she wouldn't have known Tom would be able to hear her. When she'd been alive, Tom hadn't been able to hear the voices. Besides, not all souls resisted crossing over; there were many who moved on immediately after death.

Tom agreed with what Mr. McCorkle said and knew he was probably right. Tom and Rosalie had never left things unsaid and he did know that Rosalie had truly loved him. He also knew how brave Rosalie was – she would never have been afraid or reluctant to move on. So eventually, Tom stopped worrying and wondering why Rosalie had never spoken to him and instead, whenever he agreed to pass on a message for one of the souls under his care, he would ask a favor of them in

return. He would ask them, that if they could find Rosalie when they moved on from Oak Lawn to whatever awaited them, would they please tell Rosalie that he loved her and he missed her. If it were possible to do so, he knew that his messages would be passed on to Rosalie.

Tom spent his days much as he'd always done after Rosalie was gone. It had been over two years since Rosalie had died and while he did miss her terribly, at least now he had the company of the souls still residing in the cemetery. If he felt lonely, he would simply go outside and walk the grounds and chat with any soul who felt like talking. He'd started to spend more and more time in the older section of the cemetery where there were a few souls who'd lived through World Wars I and II and they loved telling Tom stories about their experiences and Tom was fascinated by these stories. There was even one old soul in the original section of the cemetery that had been in the Civil War – and his stories were even more interesting. The dead helped Tom not feel so alone without Rosalie.

* * * *

Tom's third winter without Rosalie passed uneventfully. He spent each day making sure that any new fallen snow was removed from the roads in the cemetery and salting any ice that may have formed on them. There was something about being in the cemetery during winter that made it feel as if Tom were far removed from the rest of humanity. It was always peaceful and quiet in the cemetery, but in the winter it was even more so. Not too many visitors came to the cemetery once there was snow on the ground and some days, when snow was falling, the silence of Oak Lawn was complete. There was also less work for Tom to do in the winter, so he spent a lot of time reading in front of the small fireplace in his cottage. It was a peaceful existence for him there, surrounded by memories of Rosalie that filled the small cottage and made Tom feel as if she were still close by.

After the snows of that third winter had melted and everything turned green again, Tom was trimming shrubs along the edge of the cemetery one day when he noticed that Mary Colter's husband Randy had come back to visit. Tom hadn't heard anything further from Mrs. Colter after that day he'd passed on her messages to Mr. Colter and his sister-in-law and he assumed that she'd moved on, satisfied that her messages had been received. Tom watched as Mr. Colter left Mary's grave and instead of heading toward his car, headed straight for Tom. Tom saw him approaching and stopped what he was doing, wiping a bit of sweat from his brow with his handkerchief. Whenever people to whom Tom had passed messages sought him out later, he never knew whether they were going to be angry or grateful. Some were contrite, after having been angry when Tom first delivered the message, and some were grateful and returned to thank Tom for having given them the message, but some would see him again and be very angry and threatening. He wondered which Mr. Colter was going to be.

As Mr. Colter came closer, he lifted a hand to Tom and Tom returned the gesture. When the man had come close enough to speak, he said, "Hello, I'm Randy Colter. Do you remember me?" Tom nodded and the man continued. "I just wanted to say thank you. I really don't know what to think about the message you gave me when I was here before – I mean, if it truly did come from Mary, I don't understand how..."

"It did come from Mary," Tom confirmed.

"Well, in any event, what you said was true. Mary's sister *was* stealing from me – and what's more is that she had stolen Mary's wedding rings before Mary was laid to rest. Who would do such a thing?" Tom didn't think the man wanted him to answer so he remained silent and the man went on. "Anyway, I've taken care of the situation and I just wanted to say thank you."

"You're welcome," Tom replied.

Randy Colter stood looking at Tom for a few moments before finally asking, "I don't suppose there's anything else you can tell me? I mean, does Mary have anything else she..." His words trailed off as he began to look embarrassed and uncomfortable after having asked – as if he wasn't sure whether Tom could really speak to his dead wife or not.

"I'm sorry Mr. Colter," Tom said. "I haven't heard anything else from Mary since that day. I suspect that means she's moved on now. I think she probably knows that you took heed of her message and that has put her at peace." Tom never really knew what to say to people, but he thought that saying this would sort of explain to Mr. Colter what he himself believed to be true – that once the messages were delivered, the souls moved on to wherever they went from here.

Mr. Colter nodded and thanked Tom again before turning to go. Tom watched as the man made his way back to his car and, once inside, started the engine. Tom returned to his work. He began to hum to himself as he worked, feeling somewhat uplifted by Mr. Colter's gratitude. It was always nice when someone came back to thank him, especially because so many people thought him crazy when he passed along messages to them. Tom hoped that Mary Colter was at peace now and that she'd moved on to someplace wonderful. He liked to think that his Rosalie was waiting for him there, in that wonderful place, and that he would see her again when it was his time to go.

CHAPTER 7

Every Sunday Tom went to his parents' house for Sunday dinner. His mother loved making a big family meal and they would sit around the table eating and talking all afternoon. All the years that he and Rosalie had been together, the family had eaten Sunday dinner together and it was a tradition that Tom's mother refused to let go of. Now the table was set for three instead of four and each of them missed hearing Rosalie's laughter and missed the stories she used to tell. At first, it was difficult for Tom to come to Sunday dinner without Rosalie, but as time passed it became easier for both Tom and his parents. Where at first, their dinners were quieter and more subdued without Rosalie – each of them still grieving her absence – of late, they'd begun talking about Rosalie and recalling her stories and then telling stories of their own about Rosalie. It was easier to talk about her now and each of them, in their own way, was beginning to heal that much more through talking about their lost family member.

After dinner, Tom and his mother would clean up and put away any leftovers (and there were usually plenty) then Tom and his father would go out to the garage and tinker about, working on this or that; or the family would watch a movie together, or play a game of cards. Tom typically stayed until his parents were ready to turn in for the night and then he would walk back to his little house by the cemetery. Once in a while he would spend the night in his old room (which was later the room he shared with his new wife when he and Rosalie had gotten married).

It was after one of these family dinners that Tom was walking home, lost in his thoughts and memories, when he was accosted by a group of teenagers. Tom was pulled from his reverie when one of the kids called out, "Hey look! It's Tombstone Tom!" He looked up to see a group of kids walking toward him on the sidewalk pointing and laughing at him. Tom crossed the street in an attempt to avoid them, but the

teenagers moved as one and crossed the street too, stopping on the sidewalk a few yards ahead of him.

"What do you want?" Tom asked.

"What do we want?" the leader of the group, who Tom recognized from previous encounters, responded. He looked around at his comrades then asked, "What do we want guys? Shall we have old Tombstone Tom speak to the dead?" There was snickering from his friends and encouraged, he went on, "How about it Tom? Do you want to have a séance? Give me a message from my dead grandma?"

The boy's companions laughed even more and someone else said, "Yeah, give Greg a message from his dead grandma!"

Tom tried to walk around them and someone stepped in his way. He walked back across the street, quickening his steps, and the whole group followed him. Tom kept his head down and kept walking; they kept following, taunting him. The leader of the group had been taunting Tom for years. The boy was a bully – and Tom was an expert at recognizing bullies. As the kids walked along behind him, teasing him and laughing at him, Tom kept walking as quickly as he could, trying to reach his house before the harassment could escalate into something more than verbal taunts.

When he reached the cemetery, instead of continuing along the sidewalk and then walking up the drive to his cottage, Tom turned into the cemetery and cut across the lawn. The two girls in the group following him stopped and refused to enter, saying it was too dark and creepy and they were scared to walk over the graves at night. The three boys they were with made fun of them until eventually one of the girls gave in and followed the boys into the cemetery – and this prompted the second girl to come running quickly across the grounds to catch up so she wouldn't be left behind on the sidewalk by herself.

"Come on, Tom! Tell me what my grandma has to say!" the leader of the group taunted from behind Tom as Tom

wove his way among the gravestones toward his house.

"I told you he couldn't do it," another boy said. "He's just crazy, he can't talk to dead people. Let's get out of here."

"Yeah," a girl's frightened voice agreed. "I don't like it in here. Let's go."

"Just wait a minute you guys," the first boy said to his friends. Turning back to Tom, he called out, "If you're not crazy, you'd prove it!"

Tom stopped and turned back toward the kids who had stopped several graves behind him. He stood there in the near dark and could hear the voices of the dead all around him. The dead were encouraging him to stand up to those kids so they would stop harassing him. *Ask for a name, Tom.* One of the voices said. Tom stood with his head cocked, listening to the voices that surrounded him.

The kids stood frozen, watching Tom, unsure whether they should turn tail and run. When Tom slowly started walking back toward them, the kids took a few steps back and started whispering amongst themselves. Their leader shushed them and held out a hand indicating that they should stop and stand their ground. They did. Tom walked toward them until he was only a couple of graves from them and he stopped.

"What's your name?" he asked the lead boy.

Looking uncomfortable, and a bit frightened by Tom's approach, the boy hesitated. "His name is Greg Campbell" one of the other boys provided and Greg Campbell turned to his friend and punched him in the arm. "Ow! What'd you do that for?"

"Shut up, you idiot!" Greg Campbell snarled at his friend. "Now he knows my name. I don't want him calling the cops on me!"

"I'm not going to call the cops on you, Greg," Tom said. "I'm going to see if I can give you a message from your grandmother – like you asked. Do you still want it, or not?"

Greg looked around at his friends. They all looked scared now; even Greg had lost his bravado. The girls were

whispering for them to get out of there as they both looked around as if they were afraid they might be surrounded by ghosts or zombies. When Greg didn't respond, Tom shrugged his shoulders and turned to go.

"W...wait!" Greg finally said. Tom turned back to him and Greg squared his shoulders and asked, "Can you really talk to the dead?"

"Yes," Tom replied.

"Then show us. Prove it to us right now," Greg demanded with renewed courage.

"Yeah, prove it!" another boy said.

As this exchange was going on between Tom and the kids, the souls of Oak Lawn where busy whispering amongst themselves. They wanted to help Tom. They knew there were some Campbells in residence here and as Tom engaged the kids, they whispered words of encouragement to Tom, telling him they would find the boy's grandmother if she was still among them.

Tom stood looking at Greg Campbell as the voices around him continued to encourage him. He knew there were Campbells buried here, but he didn't know if one of them was Greg's grandmother or not. If she was buried here, was she still in residence? Or had she moved on? If she wasn't here, how would he prove to this boy that he could speak to the dead? As he stood considering his options, an idea came to him.

"Is your grandmother buried in this cemetery, Greg?" he asked the boy.

"Yeah," Greg said. "Over that way," he said and pointed.

"And did you know your grandmother when she was alive?"

"Yes. She died when I was ten."

"Okay. I'll try to see if she has a message for you," Tom said.

Greg turned to his companions and sneered, "He'll *try* to see. I knew he was a fake!" His friends nervously laughed as

Greg began taunting Tom again.

Tom held up his hand and said, "Be quiet." The kids went silent and Greg looked at Tom with suspicion. Tom cocked his head as if he were listening then said to Greg, "Your grandmother says to tell you that you've always been a brat and a bully and she's very ashamed of you."

The other kids laughed as Greg became angry. "Why you..." he started toward Tom with fists balled and Tom again held up a hand to stop him.

"Wait, there's more," Tom said. The boy stopped his advance but his demeanor didn't change. Then Tom said, "She says she knows that you were the one who started the fire."

Greg's posture suddenly changed and a look of shock came over his face. If there had been more light, Tom might have seen the color drain from the boy's face. As it was, Tom watched as shock turned to fear and the boy turned and pushed his way past his friends and ran from the cemetery. Greg's friends called after him as he ran, each of them looking from the fleeing boy and back at Tom not knowing what to think.

"Let's get out of here!" one of the girls insisted. Her remaining friends agreed and they took one last look at Tom then quickly made their way over the graves and out of the cemetery.

Good job, Tom, one of the voices said as Tom turned and headed for home.

* * * *

A few days later, Tom was trimming the grass around the headstones after having mown the grounds. He slowly and systematically moved up and down the rows of graves, making his way from one end to the other. Tom was very fastidious in his grounds-keeping and, in fact, in most everything he did. His father always told him that any job worth doing was worth doing well and Tom had always lived by that philosophy. So intent was he on his work, that Tom didn't notice the girl until

she was standing nearly in front of him.

She hadn't been able to call out to him over the noise of his weed trimmer so she'd been forced to walk across the graves – which made her somewhat uncomfortable even in the daytime – in order to reach Tom and get his attention. She hoped that he would talk to her, and take her seriously, because after the other night she was really interested in Tom's ability to talk to the dead.

As Tom switched off his weed trimmer and put it aside he thought the girl looked a bit familiar. It dawned on him after he'd wiped his hands on his pants that she was one of the girls from the group of teenagers who had accosted him a few nights ago. He grew suspicious and quickly scanned the cemetery looking to see if her friends were lurking around too. Seeing no one else, he looked back at the girl, his suspicion now mixed with curiosity.

"Um. Hi Mr... um, I'm sorry, I don't know your last name," the girl said apologetically.

"Tom is fine," he told her.

She smiled shyly and started again, "Hello, *Tom*. My name is, um, Jenny." Tom nodded and she continued, "I'm really sorry about the other night."

So she was one of the girls from the other night, Tom thought but didn't respond.

"Greg's a jerk and I'm really sorry he was, well, you know..." She looked embarrassed then, but continued, "Anyway, I'm sorry for the way he – we all – acted. I honestly wouldn't hang out with a guy like that if he wasn't my cousin."

Tom still didn't say anything in response and Jenny started shifting her weight from foot to foot, feeling awkward. "Anyway, I'm sorry to bother you like this – like I said, Greg is my cousin and he really is a total jerk – but what you said to him the other night, it really upset him and... Well, you see, everyone thinks the fire that killed our grandma was an accident. But the way Greg ran off after what you told him grandma said – and then when he wouldn't talk to me about it

later – well, I think maybe he did set that fire. Otherwise, why would he have run off like that and then refused to talk about it?"

Tom's eyebrows rose at that but he remained silent and Jenny continued. "Anyway, I don't know if anyone would believe me if I told them about what you said..." Tom's expression changed and Jenny quickly added, "But I believe what you said could be true and I want to know if that message really did come from my grandma."

"Yes," Tom said flatly. He was used to people not believing that he could speak to the dead and wondered why this girl was here asking about it. He took another look around. Was her cousin lurking here somewhere, too? Was there more harassment coming? He didn't see anyone else in the cemetery and Jenny stood looking at him curiously.

"I believe you." Jenny told him decisively.

Tom's eyebrows rose again at her declaration. He opened his mouth to speak but Jenny rushed on, "So I want to ask for your help. Would you help me, Tom?" she asked with pleading eyes.

Tom wasn't sure how he should respond. What was the girl asking of him? No one would believe *him* if she wanted him to tell someone about her grandmother's message. Better not to get involved, he decided.

"I don't think I can help you, Jenny," Tom said. "I'm sorry."

"But..."

"No one would believe me. Trust me. People in this town think I'm crazy and there's no way anyone would listen to..."

"No. That's not what I meant," Jenny said. "I want to know if you will help me with something else. Please, Tom! It would mean the world to me if you could find out if my mother has a message for me!" she pleaded, tears filling her eyes as she spoke.

"Your mother?" Tom asked.

"Yes. My mother. She died in a car accident when she was on her way to pick me up and I..." She started crying then and Tom's heart softened as she wiped at her tears and continued. "My dad couldn't deal with it afterward – he misses her so much, we all do – and he made us move away from Bright Creek. Now we can't even come here..." she swept her arm around her indicating the cemetery in which they stood, "...and it's so *hard*, you know? I just thought maybe you could..."

"Okay, Jenny," Tom interrupted her. "I'll see what I can do for you." Relief flooded the girl's face and she thanked Tom profusely.

"She's over this way," Jenny said as she pointed and started walking away from Tom. He followed her and she turned back toward him as she excitedly walked toward her mother's grave. "Her name is Sarah Singleton."

Tom knew exactly where Sarah Singleton's grave was. He picked up his pace and headed straight for the big oak tree, happy that someone had come to visit the weeping soul who had been crying practically nonstop ever since the day her husband came to tell her that he and the children were moving away. As they approached the big oak, he saw a bouquet of flowers laying on Sarah Singleton's stone and he could hear Mrs. Singleton calling Jenny's name.

Jenny slowly walked over to the headstone and placed her hand on it. "It's me again, mom. I'm back," she quietly said to the stone. She turned to look at Tom, a hopeful look on her face. "Can you talk to her for me, Tom?"

Tom! It's my daughter, Jenny! he heard Mrs. Singleton say excitedly. *Tell her I love her and I'm so proud of her! Thank her for the beautiful flowers!* Tom relayed her words to Jenny who started to cry again.

"Is she really here, Tom? Right now? Mom! Can you hear me?" Jenny asked through her tears.

"She's here and she says yes, she can hear you. She also says to tell you that it's not your fault." Jenny's tears were

flowing heavily now. Tom went on, "She also says not to give up on your dreams. Go back to your music. She's sorry that she tried to dissuade you from doing what you love. She was wrong and she's sorry that she was angry about you going to play at the coffee house that day."

Jenny crumpled to the ground in front of her mother's headstone then, sobbing with abandon. Tom was growing uncomfortable now, watching the girl in her grief. Jenny looked up at him. "Thank you, Tom!" she said between sobs. "Thank you SO much!"

Tom nodded then walked away, giving the girl some privacy. Instead of going back to his work, he walked toward his cottage. He was happy to have been able to relay a message from Mrs. Singleton to her daughter. Perhaps now the soul would move on from this place. In the very least, perhaps her weeping would finally stop. When he reached his house, he went inside and closed the door behind him. He needed to see Rosalie's face – if only in photographs. Taking down one of the photo albums from the bookshelf, he opened it to the first page. There she was, on prom night over two decades ago, holding onto his arm and smiling into the camera; her green eyes shining with happiness. Tom sat down at the kitchen table and started to cry.

CHAPTER 8

Jenny came back to visit her mother's grave every day for the next week while she was still visiting her cousins in Bright Creek. The next time she saw Tom, he was out in front of the shed, cleaning his tools before putting them away. Jenny walked down the sloping dirt drive and called out to him. As he looked up, she waved and smiled. He lifted a hand in return then went back to his cleaning. When she was close enough for Tom to hear her, Jenny thanked him again for helping her talk to her mother. Tom acknowledged her words then excused himself while he stowed his tools in the shed and wiped his dirty hands on a rag.

When Tom finished what he was doing, Jenny asked him if her mother had given him any more messages, but Tom told her he'd been unable to hear her mother since the day he'd talked to her for Jenny. He told Jenny how he figured things worked and Jenny seemed to understand – and even agree – with what he said. She told Tom that she thought his explanation made sense and she was glad her mother had moved on to Heaven or wherever. Tom was happy that Mrs. Singleton had moved on, too. Her weeping had been so sad, and lasted for so long! Tom was relieved that Mrs. Singleton wasn't sad anymore. Of course, he didn't tell Jenny about her mother's crying – no need to upset the girl further.

"How do you do it, Tom?" Jenny asked. "I mean... how do you hear the spirits? Do they sound far away? Or muffled because they're buried deep under the ground? Is it a voice inside your head? Do you go into some sort of trance? I mean, it doesn't look like you do, but do you? It's all so fascinating..."

Tom could see that Jenny's questions were sincere and that she wasn't teasing him or making fun of him. Her curiosity was written all over her face as she looked up at him and he responded, "No, I don't go into a trance or... I don't really do anything special – they just talk and I can hear them. It's just

like you talking to me right now. The spirits sound just like regular people to me. Like I'm just having a regular conversation with someone who's standing right here with me, you know? They don't sound far away, they sound like they're right next to me – sometimes they get a little too close, actually. Oh, and they're not underground – I mean, not the spirits themselves."

"Oh, wow. That's crazy!" Jenny blushed and hurried to explain herself, "I mean, crazy in a cool way – not that *you're* crazy."

Tom smiled and said, "Yeah, I knew what you meant."

"Good! Because I wasn't trying to... well, you know! Anyway, do you have to be standing right by their grave to be able to hear them?"

"No, they can talk to me pretty much anywhere, I guess. But I think the spirits tend to sort of hang around their graves because that's where the living come to visit them, you know? I don't think they have to stay near their graves... but to be honest with you, I'm not really sure how all of that works."

"That's really interesting! I can't imagine being able to hear ghosts. Some people can actually *see* them, too. I think I'd rather be able to hear them – like you – than to see them! Seeing them would really freak me out, I think."

"Yeah, it would probably freak me out, too," Tom admitted.

Just as Jenny was curious about Tom, he was curious about the message he'd given Jenny from her mother concerning music. He asked Jenny about it and she explained the significance of the message saying that she'd planned to become a professional musician and singer. She told Tom how she'd been playing her guitar and singing at a coffee shop the night her mother was killed. She and her mother had argued about her playing the gig because her mother had disapproved of her trying to be a musician. Jenny told Tom that she'd gone to the gig anyway and because of that, her mother had been

killed in a car accident when she was on her way to the coffee shop to pick her up. Jenny said she'd felt guilty ever since – because she thought it was all her fault that her mother had died.

After brushing away Tom's apologies for having brought the topic up, Jenny went on to tell him about her passion for music and how all she'd ever wanted since she was really young was to become a musician. She told Tom how she'd taught herself to play the piano and the guitar, and how she'd been singing for as long as she could remember. She was in the choir at school, too. Jenny was very enthusiastic as she talked about music. Tom enjoyed seeing the girl so animated. His Rosalie had been like that – always animated and enthusiastic about things she was passionate about.

"When you talk about music, you remind me of my wife," Tom commented.

"I heard about your wife and I'm really sorry," Jenny said. Her family had still lived in Bright Creek when Tom and Rosalie were run down by the drunk driver and she'd heard about it the day after it happened.

"Thank you, that's very kind of you to say. I miss her very much, just like you miss your mom," Tom responded.

"Yeah, I really do miss my mom – a lot," Jenny said sadly, then she brightened and asked, "You said I reminded you of your wife, was she a musician too?"

"No. She wasn't a musician, but she was very passionate about the things that she was interested in. Hearing you talk about music – you're so passionate about it – your enthusiasm just reminds me of her," Tom explained.

"Oh," Jenny replied. "Did you ever... I mean... did she ever... you know, *talk* to you... I mean, *after*?"

"No. She never did," Tom said wistfully. "I did wonder about that, at first, but when she was alive, I couldn't hear them. It was only *after* the accident – when I woke up from a coma – it was after she was already gone, you see. She wouldn't have known..."

"You mean you haven't been able to talk to spirits your whole life? It just started after you got hit by that car?" Jenny asked, fascinated. "That's pretty cool! Oh, but I'm sorry you didn't get to talk to your wife," she said sadly.

"Me too," Tom replied.

"I bet she was a really nice lady. I wish I could have met her."

"Well you may have met her before if you ever went to the library when you lived in Bright Creek. She was one of the librarians there. Her name was Rosalie."

Jenny scrunched her nose as she searched her memory trying to recall a librarian named Rosalie. She told Tom that she'd gone to the library quite often when she lived in Bright Creek and thought that she probably did meet his wife before. Tom described what Rosalie looked like and Jenny's face lit as she recognized the description. She told Tom that she was sure Rosalie had helped her to find books on several occasions and that she thought Rosalie was a very nice lady. Hearing this pleased Tom and made him smile.

"You've got a nice smile," Jenny told him and he felt a little flush of embarrassment at the compliment. "You're a really nice man, Tom. I'm sorry my cousin is so mean to you. He's mean to most people, if you want to know the truth. I wish I could prove that he set the fire that killed our grandma," she sighed. "You don't suppose you could try to talk to her again? See if she has anything else to say about it?"

"Uh... I don't know, Jenny," Tom said as he considered her request.

Was Jenny's grandmother still here? Would it be possible that Mrs. Campbell could give them information that would prove that Jenny's cousin had started the fire? Tom shook his head. Even if the spirit *could* give them proof, did Tom want to get involved? No. He thought not. Nothing good could come from him exposing himself to more ridicule – but on the other hand, what if Jenny's grandmother hasn't passed on *because* they hadn't discovered who set the fire?

Jenny was looking at him with an expectant look on her face as Tom thought it over. When he finally spoke he said, "I suppose I could *try*, just to see if she's still here and if there's anything she can tell us – but she may not be here any longer."

"You mean she may have passed on that message to Greg and then moved on? Like my mom?"

"Exactly."

"Okay, I understand. But please, let's *try*, okay?"

Tom agreed that he would *try* and he led her through the cemetery to where the Campbell family plot was located; it was surrounded by a scrolled ironwork fence. Tom opened the gate and he and Jenny stepped inside. There was one big monument in the center of the rectangular plot engraved with the name Campbell and there were three headstones lined up on either side, each inscribed with the names of a husband and wife in the Campbell family line. He didn't know Mrs. Campbell's first name, so he turned to Jenny and asked, "What was your grandmother's first name, Jenny?"

"Her name was Virginia, but she went by Ginny," Jenny told Tom and she pointed to a stone to their left.

Tom scanned the stones in that direction and found Virginia's name. When he saw the stone with her name on it, he walked over to it, with Jenny following, and he stopped at the foot of the grave and spoke out loud, "Mrs. Campbell?"

Yes? He heard two voices say at once.

Tom cleared his voice and said, "I'm looking for Ginny Campbell."

She's not here, the other two Mrs. Campbells responded as one. *She's gone on*, one of them informed Tom.

"She's not here any longer," Tom said to Jenny. "She's moved on."

"Oh," Jenny said, a bit disappointed. "Well thanks for trying, Tom. I guess she just wanted Greg to know that she knew, huh?"

"I guess so," Tom agreed.

Who is this girl to Ginny? one of the Mrs. Campbells

asked.

"This is her granddaughter, Jenny," Tom replied.

Jenny looked at him quizzically and asked, "Who are you talking to, Tom?"

"I'm not sure. Another Mrs. Campbell, I think. There are two voices – maybe they're both Mrs. Campbells." He and Jenny looked around at the other gravestones, reading the names and dates. "Do you know any of the others?" he asked.

"No. I don't think so," Jenny answered.

"Are you Mrs. Campbell?" Tom queried.

I am, one voice said. *I am, too*, another voice answered.

"Is there something either of you want to say to Ginny's granddaughter?" Tom asked them. Jenny stood silently by, waiting, as Tom listened to voices she couldn't hear.

"Okay, one at a time, please!" Tom interrupted the voices that were both speaking at once then cocked his head as he listened to first one Mrs. Campbell and then the other. When they'd finished he said, "Yes. I'll tell her."

"One of them says her name is Mamie Campbell," he pointed to one of the headstones where her name was written, "She says that she's your great-great grandmother. She wants me to tell you to look for the writing desk that belonged to her. She says there's a secret compartment behind the top drawer and she wants you to look inside because she hid her diary there and she doesn't want it to fall into the hands of strangers."

"Oh!" Jenny exclaimed with excitement, "I know which desk she means! It's still in my uncle's house! I'll find your diary, Mamie!" she promised.

Thank you, child.

"She says thank you," Tom relayed. "And the *other* Mrs. Campbell said she's your great aunt Shelly and she wants to know if you will pass on a message to her daughter, Katie." Jenny nodded and Tom went on, "She wants Katie to know that she's sorry that she didn't believe her and she hopes Katie can forgive her."

"Don't worry Aunt Shelly," Jenny said. "I'll tell her."

"She also says to tell Katie that she loves her," Tom added.

"I will," Jenny promised. "Thank you, Tom."

Tom nodded in response and Jenny asked if there was anything else that Mamie or Shelly wanted her to pass on. When Tom asked, he got no response and he smiled at Jenny and told her that he thought they might be gone. Jenny took one last look around the Campbell family plot then she and Tom walked out the gate and crossed the cemetery to the road.

"It must really make you feel good to know that you're helping spirits to cross over, huh?" Jenny asked as they walked along the road that lead out of the cemetery.

"Well, I guess knowing that I'm helping them makes me feel good, but not everyone is as open-minded about it as you are, Jenny. Most people think I'm crazy already, and when I try to give them messages, well, that just makes me look even crazier. That part doesn't make me feel good."

"Oh. Yeah. I'm sorry, Tom. I guess I wasn't thinking... Anyway, I don't think you're crazy. I think you're amazing."

"That's nice of you to say, Jenny," Tom said. They'd reached the entrance to the cemetery and Tom stopped walking.

Jenny turned to him and told him, "I'm going home tomorrow so I might not see you again for a while. I'll come back, though, next time I'm in Bright Creek – I mean, if that would be okay with you?"

Tom nodded and smiled at her. "I'd like that, Jenny," he said.

"Good. Me too." She smiled at him and said, "I think I'll go see if I can find Mamie's diary now. Thanks Tom. Thanks for everything."

"You're welcome Jenny."

Jenny turned and walked out of the cemetery. She turned one last time to give Tom a wave and a smile before heading up the sidewalk and out of Tom's view. He stood there

for a few moments then started walking back up the road, heading for the tool shed to finish his chores.

CHAPTER 9

Art Hauxwell was tired. He'd been on the job for too many years. Crime in the city never slept and Art was tired of chasing it. He'd been on the force for over twenty-five years, having worked his way up from beat cop to detective, and had never quite been willing to move up the ranks any further. When he'd first made detective, he'd loved the thrill of the chase and the investigations. He'd been young and eager to do a thorough job; he'd wanted to clean up the streets of his city and make them safer. The years had taught him that for every thief and murderer he was able to put behind bars, there were two more graduating from petty crimes to felonies. You could never catch up.

Lately Art had been reconsidering the wisdom of remaining a detective. Maybe he needed to move up the ranks and get out of the trenches. Maybe getting behind a desk full time would be less draining. As it was, he'd started counting the days until he could retire with full pension. Three more years. He was thinking that maybe after he retired he would leave the city and move someplace small. He wanted to spend his days fishing and drinking beer, but he knew himself better than that. He would need to ease into it. Instead of jumping right into full retirement, Art was hoping to find a comfy police chief job in a small community where there wasn't much crime to speak of. He planned to put out feelers when he got closer to his retirement date hoping to find the perfect semi-retirement position. He wanted to sit behind a desk and maybe drive through town once or twice a day. He wanted to be like Sheriff Taylor on that old television program *The Andy Griffith Show* – without the young son and Aunt Bea, of course – and live a bucolic lifestyle in a small town, far removed from the city.

It seemed like the closer he got to retirement, the more the cases were coming across his desk. Art picked up the file on the top of the stack on his desk and opened it for the

umpteenth time, hoping to see something new that he'd missed all the other times he'd looked at the crime scene photos. He moved aside the stack of folders and began spreading the photos across his desk. What was he missing? There had to be something in these photos that would help him figure out who killed the girl. He opened his top drawer and pulled out his magnifying glass and, one by one, he picked up the photos and searched for that elusive clue that he'd thus far not found.

"Boy, you really can't teach an old dog new tricks, can you Art?" Detective Michaels laughed as he walked past. "You know they have these things called computers now, don't you?"

"Keep on laughing, funny boy," Art muttered as he continued to scrutinize the photo he held in his hand. So what if he preferred to do it the old fashioned way? Michaels and his computer hadn't found any clues yet either. Just because Art didn't like looking at crime scene photos on his computer didn't mean he wasn't thorough when he did his job. And he wasn't *that* old, was he?

Detective Michaels came back with a cup of coffee and sat down at the desk opposite Art and pulled the photos up on his computer. "Seriously, though, have you found anything?" He asked Art as he slowly dragged his mouse across his mousepad clicking every now and then.

"No. Not a damn thing – yet. But there has to be something here that we're missing," Art said, exasperated, as he set down the picture he'd been looking at and selected another from the array on his desk. "Any word from the lab yet?"

"No. I just talked to them and they said *maybe* by the end of the day – but probably not until tomorrow," Michaels replied.

"What about the canvass? Did that pull up any witnesses?" Art asked.

"They're still working on it. Hopefully they'll find somebody who saw something. I told Jefferson to report to us

as soon as he gets back to the precinct."

"Good. Let's hope he comes up with something." Art picked up another photo and started scanning it. "Whoever did this is one sick bastard," he commented as he magnified the area surrounding the victim's body.

"Yeah. A real sicko," Michaels agreed as he, too, zoomed in on a photo. "Do we have an ID on the vic yet?"

"Anderson is running her prints to see if he can find her in the system and Smitty is going through missing persons reports looking for a possible match," Art told him as he put down another photo and selected one more. "She looks young – teenager, maybe early twenties. Seems like somebody would have reported her missing. Hopefully Smitty will find a match."

The photo in his hand was a close-up of the girl's wrist. She'd been bound at some point during her ordeal and there were bruises and abrasions on her wrist consistent with having been bound by some type of rope. Art hoped the lab would be able to tell them exactly what she'd been bound with. Whoever had killed her had done so elsewhere and had removed any useful evidence before leaving her naked body in an abandoned tenement where she'd been found by a homeless guy looking for a place to sleep. Poor girl was carved up like a Halloween pumpkin. Whoever did this to her had taken his sweet time in killing her. Most of the cuts hadn't been life-threatening, but they sure as hell would have been painful.

Without having any clothing or other personal items to help identify the girl, they were hoping to find her in their database of missing persons or get a hit on her fingerprints. Until then, all they could do was wait for canvassing and lab work to be completed and hope they would have something to go on. The photos weren't revealing anything useful so far, but since they had nothing else to work with at the moment, they kept going over them again and again hoping to find something they'd missed.

Art picked up the photo of the girl's other wrist and held his magnifying glass up to it. This wrist had bruising and

abrasions similar to those on the other wrist. As he slowly scrutinized every mark and color variation, he noticed something he hadn't noticed before.

"Michaels, come over here would you?" Art asked without taking his eyes off the photograph in his hand.

"What? Did you find something?" Michaels asked as he pushed back from his desk and got up. He walked around behind Art and peered over his shoulder. "What do you see?"

"I'm not sure but it looks like there might be something..." Art said as he put the picture down on his desk and handed the magnifying glass to his partner. Michaels took it and bent over the photo as Art pointed to an area on the girl's wrist. "Right here, see that mark right there? Could that be the impression of some kind of charm or something? Maybe the girl was wearing a bracelet when she was tied up? See how it's nearly obscured by the abrasions?"

"Yeah! I think you're right!" Michaels agreed excitedly. "Looks like maybe it was pressed into her skin by whatever she was bound with. That would explain the color of the mark. But what do you think it is? Looks kinda like a flower, maybe?" He handed the magnifying glass back to Art and hurried back to his computer to pull up the picture on his screen.

Art picked the picture up and looked at it under the magnifying glass again. "Could be a flower... or maybe... a shamrock?"

Michaels zoomed in on the spot and said, "I think it's a shamrock. Damn! I guess that old-school magnifying glass is a lot better than I thought! Come on, let's go show this to the Captain and see what he thinks." He hit the print button and printed out the section of the photograph that showed the imprint then he and Art headed for their Captain's office.

* * * *

That night, Art couldn't sleep. He was exhausted but sleep eluded him. He couldn't stop thinking about the case.

The Captain had agreed that the imprint on the girl's wrist looked like a shamrock, but what did that get them? It certainly wasn't a means to identifying her. But at least it was *something*. The canvass so far hadn't dug up any potential witnesses, but Jefferson would be going out again tomorrow ringing doorbells and knocking on doors. They should have the lab results by tomorrow afternoon and hopefully that would give them some useful forensic evidence. So far they had nothing to go on to even get started investigating. Identifying the girl would give them someplace to start and Art made a mental note to put a couple more people on the missing persons' angle to help Smitty comb through the reports.

If they were able to identify the girl, Art didn't look forward to telling her family about what had happened to her. It was one of the worst parts of his job when he had to tell a family that their loved one had been murdered. And the way this girl had been killed – slowly, and most likely extremely painfully – Art didn't even want to think about how her family would feel when they heard the details of her death. He knew it couldn't be helped, though. Even if he didn't give them all the details, eventually they would find out anyway. If the perp is caught and goes to trial, the girl's family will no doubt see the very photos that he and Michaels have been looking at for the past few days. Better to tell them from the get-go than to let them find out publicly later on.

Art's mind drifted to his niece who was about the same age as the dead girl. She was in her teens and she was a good girl. His niece was the closest thing to a daughter that Art would ever have. He couldn't imagine how difficult it would be to be the parents of a girl who'd been tortured and killed then found naked in an abandoned tenement. Had this happened to his niece – or any of his nieces or nephews – it would have torn Art apart. He'd never had children of his own, as neither of his two marriages had lasted long enough for children to come into the picture, but he did have several nieces and nephews that meant so much to him; he thought

the world of them and liked to think they felt the same about him.

Art's mother had been married twice and all together she'd had five children. Art was the only one of the five without children of his own. He felt lucky that he and his siblings were all close because it allowed him to be a part of his nieces' and nephews' lives. Since the day each and every one of them was born, Uncle Art had always been the one they all called when they got into trouble and didn't want to call their parents; the one the boys talked to about sex; the one who always told them the truth and never tried to sugar-coat life. He couldn't imagine how it would feel to lose one of them, let alone to lose one to a murderer. It made him sick to think about it.

As he thought about the dead girl he wondered if she'd known her killer. Had she trusted the person who did this to her? Or had she been a random victim, unlucky enough to have been in the wrong place at the wrong time and been selected by the perp simply because she'd been there? As soon as they identified the girl, they could start trying to trace her moves and find out where she'd last been seen, then they might be able to figure out when and where she'd come into contact with her killer. As it was, the investigation was at a stand-still, and Art couldn't sleep.

He got up and went to the kitchen, switching on lights as he made his way through the apartment. He might as well get up if he wasn't going to be able to sleep. The worst part of it was, that the unidentified dead girl wasn't even his only case. He had several other cases that he was actively investigating, but this one was different. They had no clues – nothing to go on to get the investigation rolling. Art grabbed a beer from the fridge and popped the cap with the bottle opener that clung by a magnet to the front of the fridge. He went to the table and pulled out a chair and sat down. He'd brought home his case files and he pulled them from his briefcase and piled them on the table. He took a sip of his beer then pulled a file from the

stack in front of him and opened it. If he couldn't sleep, he might as well work.

CHAPTER 10

It was Sunday and Tom was on his way to his parents' house for Sunday dinner. He and his father planned to watch a football game after dinner and Tom was looking forward to drinking a few beers and hanging out with his dad. As he walked along the sidewalk, Tom couldn't help but notice the fliers that were tacked here and there on trees and utility poles. *Missing!* the flier proclaimed. Tom stopped and looked at the picture on the poster. A girl with long brown hair and a slightly crooked smile stared out at him. *Have you seen me?* the flier asked. Tom didn't recognize the girl, but he read the information under the picture anyway. *Nancy Wilcox, Age 19, last seen June 12th at Smith's Field. If you have any information regarding Nancy's whereabouts, please contact Bright Creek Police.* June 12th had been just two days ago. Tom shook his head, saddened that the girl was missing but knowing he hadn't seen her. He started walking again, noting several more posters spaced out along his route.

When Tom was a teenager, Smith's field had been a popular place for kids to party – not that Tom had ever been to one of the parties there, but he'd known where the field was. It was a hay field out at old farmer Smith's farm between Bright Creek and Smith Falls. Old farmer Smith had grown hay on several of his fields that ran along a dirt road out past Luigi's, off of Route 90. Each summer Smith rotated his fields and there was always at least one field he let lie fallow and every summer the kids from both Bright Creek and Smith Falls would meet out in a fallow field and party. Most of Smith's fields were hidden from the road by a stand of trees so parties couldn't be seen from the road and the fields along that road were several miles from Smith's farmhouse so there was little danger of Smith discovering the parties that went on in his hay fields.

Although Tom had never been to a party at Smith's field, he had driven out there once out of curiosity. He'd driven

down the dirt road about two miles before he came upon several cars parked alongside the road. He'd slowed to a stop and rolled down his window and could hear laughter and music coming from the other side of the trees. He'd known that this was Smith's field. When another car came up the road behind him, Tom started driving again and went a few miles further up the road until he found a place to turn around. When he'd driven back to where the parked cars were, the car that had come up behind him was now parked alongside the road too and Tom drove slowly past as he headed back home.

Sometime between then and now, someone had purchased Smith's hay fields and turned them into a venue of sorts, and each summer various concerts and music festivals were held there. It still wasn't much more than a big open field, except now there was a stage at one end of it and it was enclosed by fencing with a row of porta johns running along the back fence. The events held there were nothing in comparison to something like Woodstock, but they still drew fairly decent sized crowds. The missing girl must have been at a concert out there and not come home afterward. *Maybe she went home with friends for the weekend and didn't tell her parents. She'll probably turn up soon,* Tom thought.

As he neared his parents' house, Tom noticed the grass was getting tall and needed to be trimmed from around the trees out front. His father usually trimmed when he mowed the yard but he must have forgotten this time. Tom decided he would help his father out and trim the grass after dinner. Since they typically ate their big Sunday dinner around two in the afternoon, he would have plenty of time to do the trimming before the football game came on.

He walked up the driveway and when he reached the back yard, Tom could smell his mother's pot roast and his stomach rumbled. He saw his mother through the window standing in front of the kitchen sink just as she looked out and saw him approaching. She smiled and waved. Tom smiled in return as he mounted the porch steps and his mother met him

at the back door.

"Tom, come in!" she said brightly as she held the door open to him. "It's so nice to see you!"

Tom went inside and the door fell closed behind him. He kissed his mother on the cheek and said, "It smells delicious in here mom! Is there anything I can do to help?"

"Now don't be silly! I've got everything under control. Why don't you go on in the living room and see your father. He hasn't been feeling too well since yesterday afternoon. I'm a little bit worried about him. Go see him and then come back and tell me what you think, should I make him see the doctor tomorrow?"

"I noticed he didn't trim the grass around the trees out front when he mowed the lawn. If he's not feeling well, that would explain it because it's not like him not to trim," Tom said.

"No, it's not," his mother agreed. "He came in after mowing yesterday and said he wasn't feeling well and I made him go take a nap. He hasn't been acting quite right since then, and I don't know what to think about it. He says he's okay and that I shouldn't worry, but he seems a bit pale to me. You go in there and see him now. See if he seems okay to you."

"I will," Tom assured her then snatched up a biscuit from the pan cooling on the counter and left the kitchen. He took a bite of the biscuit as he made his way down the hall and into the living room. His father sat in his recliner reading the newspaper. "Hey dad," Tom said as he entered the room.

His father lowered the newspaper and looked up at Tom as Tom took a seat on the couch. "Hello Tom," his father said. "How're you doing today?"

"I'm doing fine," Tom responded. "But mom is worried about you. Are you feeling okay?"

Mr. Connor gave his son a slightly irritated look as he folded his paper and said, "I told her I was feeling just fine today," he proclaimed. "I don't know why she insists on making such a fuss."

"Because she loves you, dad. Are you sure you're feeling okay?"

"Yes, I am, so don't you get started on me too!"

Tom chuckled and said, "Okay, okay. I believe you. But I did notice the grass around the trees needs trimming and I thought I'd do that for you after dinner, if you don't mind?"

"I was planning to do it tomorrow, but if you want to do it, I won't stop you."

"Great. I'll do it after dinner then, and you can just relax and take it easy. I'm going to go see how long until dinner. I'm starving!" Tom got up from the couch and went to the kitchen as his father unfolded his newspaper and picked up reading where he'd left off.

* * * *

After dinner, Tom went out to the garage to get the trimmer then walked around the yard trimming the grass. His father had seemed just fine to him during dinner, so hopefully whatever had been wrong with him yesterday had already passed. His parents were getting older now, but Tom hoped they would both stay in good health and be with him for many more years before he had to start worrying about losing them. They were all he had in the world, now that his Rosalie was gone, and he didn't know what he would do without them. He didn't even want to think about what life would be like without one, or both, of his parents.

When he was done with the grass, Tom went back inside the house and cleaned himself up. His parents were in the living room and he could hear the television. The announcers were talking about the game that was about to get underway. Tom took a beer from the fridge and twisted off the top before heading out to the living room to join his parents. His father was reclined in his chair, beer in hand, watching TV and his mother was on the couch with her knitting basket at her feet working on a half-finished sweater that covered her

lap.

"Ah, you made it," his father said as Tom came in and took a seat on the couch. "You're just in time. The game is about to start."

"Should be a good one today," Tom commented as he sipped his beer. He leaned back and put his feet up on the coffee table and settled in to watch the game.

After the first quarter, Mr. Connor straightened in his recliner and got up to go to the fridge for another beer. "You ready for another one, Tom?" he asked as he crossed the room headed for the kitchen.

Tom tipped his bottle to his mouth and swallowed the last of his beer before handing the empty bottle to his dad saying, "Sure. Thanks dad."

Mr. Connor left the room and went to the kitchen as Mrs. Connor held up the sweater she was working on and asked, "Hold this up to yourself Tom, I want to make sure this sleeve is going to be long enough."

Tom stood up and took the sweater from his mother and held it up to himself. Extending one arm, he checked the length of the sleeve against his arm while his mother calculated how much longer it needed to be. Just as Tom was handing the sweater back to his mother, they heard a crash from the kitchen.

"Oh that man!" Tom's mother exclaimed. "Go see that he hasn't hurt himself on broken glass, will you Tom?"

"Of course," Tom said and headed for the kitchen. "Dad, you all right?" he called out as he passed the dining room and went down the hall to push through the swinging door into the kitchen.

"Dad!" Tom cried with alarm when he saw his father sprawled out on the floor in a pool of beer. "Dad, are you okay?" He kneeled down next to his father, who didn't respond. "Dad! Dad! Can you hear me, dad?"

Mrs. Connor pushed through the kitchen door nearly knocking Tom over as she worriedly asked, "What's going

on..." She stopped abruptly, her hand going to her mouth as she saw her husband lying on the floor.

"Mom, call 9-1-1," Tom instructed. "Hurry!" Mrs. Connor went to the phone on the wall and grabbed the receiver. She dialed as Tom took hold of his father's wrist to check for a pulse. "Dad! Can you hear me?" he asked as he frantically tried to feel a pulse, but his father remained silent and unmoving. As his mother talked to the emergency operator, pleading for an ambulance right away, Tom put his hand to his father's neck, still trying to find a pulse.

"Tom!" His mother was calling to him from where she stood with the phone in her hand. "Tom, she wants to know if he's breathing. Is he breathing, Tom?" His mother's voice sounded panicky but controlled as she stood clutching the receiver and hoping that Tom would say yes.

Tom looked up at his mother and told her no, he wasn't breathing and he couldn't feel a pulse. He leaned in and put his ear on his father's chest. He couldn't hear anything, so he tilted his father's head back and started to do CPR, feeling grateful to Rosalie for having made him go to a CPR class held at the library a few years previously.

"Come on dad," Tom urged, but he could tell the CPR wasn't working. He kept it up, though, unwilling to give up, until the EMTs arrived and took over. Tom stood up and moved out of their way; he stood holding his mother and watching helplessly. When his father was still unresponsive, the EMTs finally gave up. They told Tom and his mother they were sorry and there was nothing more they could do.

"No! NO!" Mrs. Connor screamed as she realized that her husband truly was dead. She lost her composure and the telephone receiver she held, with the emergency operator still on the other end, dropped to the floor with a thud as she hurried across the room and came down on her knees next to her husband on the floor. She laid her head on his chest, hoping to hear his heart beating under her ear but there was nothing to hear. She burst into tears and shifted her position

so she could take her husband's head into her lap. She gently stroked his hair as she looked down at his lifeless face, her tears flowing freely.

Tom picked the phone up off the floor and quietly apologized to the operator on the other end. He thanked the operator and then hung up. After also thanking the EMTs, he went down on his knees next to his father and took his father's hand, holding it between his own, trying to comprehend how his father could be dead. Tears started spilling down his cheeks as he sat there in broken glass, beer soaking his pants, knowing that his life would never be the same – and neither would his mother's.

The EMTs quietly went outside to wait for the ambulance, giving Tom and his mother time alone in their grief. Tom felt numb. He couldn't believe his father was dead. It had been just minutes before that he'd left them in the living room while he went to get more beer. How could he be *dead*? Tom watched as his mother sat slowly rocking back and forth, her husband's head on her lap, tears streaming down her face.

You must comfort your mother, Tom a voice said. Startled, Tom looked around, thinking how much the voice had sounded like his father's; wondering if the voice had been in his head. *Tom! Your mother needs you!* He heard the voice again, more insistent now, and he knew it *was* his father's voice he was hearing.

"Dad?" Tom whispered as he looked down at his father's lifeless body lying on the floor. His mother looked up at him then and stopped rocking back and forth.

"Tom?" she said through her tears. Tom looked up from his father to his mother and saw comprehension light his mother's face. "You can hear him! He's here, isn't he Tom?"

"I... I don't know," Tom said and looked around the room. "Dad? Was that you? Are you here?"

Yes, Tom. I'm here. Tom's mother sat looking at him as his eyes went wide with surprise.

"Tom! He's here!" his mother exclaimed and Tom

slowly nodded. "Tell him I love him! Tom, tell him!" she urged.

"He says he can hear you, mom, and that he loves you too. He says he's sorry... sorry that he has to leave you – sorry that he has to leave *us*," Tom said through his tears.

CHAPTER 11

Until the day Tom's father died, he'd had no idea that he could hear the dead anywhere except in the cemetery. He'd actually thought he could hear them *because* he was in the cemetery. It had never occurred to him that he would be able to hear them anywhere else. But after his father had spoken to him in the kitchen of his parents' house, Tom and his mother had followed the ambulance into Smith Falls to the hospital and Tom had heard a myriad of voices in the hospital, too.

He hadn't responded to any of the voices he'd heard at the hospital; he'd been too shocked and overwhelmed by his father's death to think about anything or anyone else but his mother. Tom hadn't been willing to acknowledge any of the other voices he heard at the hospital and he'd held out hope that his father had not crossed over after talking to him in the kitchen; he hoped his father was still with them. But his father hadn't spoken to him again and Tom wondered if his father had said everything that he'd wanted – or needed – to say to them right there in the kitchen. Had his father left them before his body had even been taken away to the hospital? Part of Tom would be happy if his father had been able to move on so seamlessly, but another part of him – the selfish part – would be sad and disappointed if his father was gone from their lives forever. Only the thought of Rosalie being there to greet his father as he crossed from this world to the next gave Tom any comfort.

When Tom and his mother returned from the hospital, Tom opened the back door and held it for her while she went inside. The broken glass from the beer bottles still littered the floor and the beer had dried into a sticky mess. There were sticky footprints scattered about the room as well as wheel tracks from the gurney that had been brought in to move his father's body. Tom's mother headed straight for the broom closet to get the mop.

"Mom," Tom said. "Why don't you let me do that for

you? Maybe you should sit down." His mother looked up at him, her eyes rimmed with tears, and held the mop out to him. Tom took it from her and set it aside. Taking her still outstretched hand, he led her to the table where he pulled out a chair for her to sit down. She stood looking down at it but instead of sitting, she leaned against the table and just stood there looking at the empty chair.

Tom was loathe to leave his mother alone. She was, understandably, devastated by the loss of her husband. "Mom," he said to her. "I want to stay here with you for a while – if that's okay."

"Oh yes, Tom!" his mother cried and she turned to look up at him. "I would love for you to be here with me. I just don't know how to exist without your father here!" She began to cry then and Tom took her into his arms and held her. Silently, he cried too.

When his mother's crying had subsided, Tom suggested, "I'll just take the car and run home for a few things, shall I? Would you like to ride along with me?"

"No. You go. I'll be okay. I think I'd like to take a shower and get ready for bed."

"Okay. I'll just be a few minutes," Tom said and kissed his mother's forehead before letting her go. She smiled weakly and watched him as he grabbed his father's keys from the peg on the wall then left through the back door.

Tom drove the short distance to his house where he gathered up a few of his things and shoved them into a suitcase. He took a quick look around the house, making sure he had everything he needed and when he was satisfied that he did, he took the suitcase out to the car and put it in the back seat. He locked up the cottage before getting back into the car and driving up and down through the cemetery, checking that things were okay, then he drove out of the cemetery and back to his mother's house.

When he got there, Tom parked the car in the garage and turned off the ignition. He sat in his father's car staring out

through the windshield, not seeing just the interior of the garage, but also seeing his father there working at his workbench. Tom thought about all the things his father had taught him in this garage; all the times they'd worked on the lawnmower or tinkered under the hood of the car; all the times they'd spent readying their fishing gear to go fishing early the next morning; all the father and son talks they'd had out here where they were out of hearing of his mother; all the things Tom had confided to his father over the years. Tears slid down Tom's cheeks as he remembered all the happy times he'd shared with his father in this garage.

Tom finally pulled himself together, got out of the car, and retrieved his suitcase from the backseat. After closing the garage door, he headed inside. As he came into the kitchen, he could hear the shower running upstairs. He figured his mother needed some private time, so he set his suitcase on the floor out of the way and began picking up the remnants of the broken beer bottles. When he thought he'd gotten them all, he looked under the sink for his mother's mopping bucket and filled it with water. After retrieving the mop he slowly and methodically cleaned the sticky floor. By the time he heard the shower turn off, he was on his final pass with the mop.

* * * *

A few days later, Tom and his mother went to the funeral home to make arrangements for his father's burial. The funeral home had once been the home of one of the town's founding families. It was a large Victorian house that had been converted into a funeral home three generations before Tom had come to live in Bright Creek. As soon as Tom and his mother entered the funeral home, Tom was assailed by voices of the dead. They were all around him in this place – just as they'd been at the hospital – but this place was much smaller than the hospital and Tom felt claustrophobic with the sudden onslaught of voices surrounding him. He tried not to panic. *As*

long as they don't know I can hear them, I'll be okay, he told himself.

Tom knew he had to be careful and not let on that he could hear them. It was one thing to communicate with those at Oak Lawn who were under his care but it would be quite another thing to have spirits following him wherever he went trying to get him to pass on their messages or otherwise help them deal with unfinished business. Tom's mother noticed that he was acting strangely and asked him if he was okay. He assured her that he was fine just as one of the funeral directors entered the room to greet them.

They followed the man into another room where he told them to be seated on the couch and he took a seat in an arm chair opposite them. There was a coffee table in between them with informational brochures laying on it. Tom picked up one of the brochures as the man began speaking with his mother about the arrangements. She'd spoken to him on the phone the day before and had outlined for him the type of service they wanted to have, so today's face-to-face meeting was to firm up the plans, sign the paperwork, and put down a deposit. As his mother spoke to the funeral director, Tom thumbed through the brochure and pretended he couldn't hear the other voices in the room.

After a few minutes, the funeral director led Tom and his mother into an adjacent room to look at caskets. He explained to them which caskets were priced within the range of the plan they had settled on and then he told them to take their time making their decision. Tom's mother slowly walked from one casket to the next, then back again, comparing the few they had to choose from and Tom trailed along behind her mimicking her movements while trying to ignore the voices. *Hey, a voice whispered next to Tom's ear, can you hear me?* Startled at the closeness, Tom abruptly turned away from the voice and went to his mother's side and asked her which of the caskets she preferred. They had a brief discussion and settled on a sleek, gray model with light blue interior.

Why can't anybody hear me? A woman's voice lamented as

Tom's mother told the funeral director which casket they had chosen. *I need to get a message to my wife!* A man's voice said as Tom and his mother were led from the room. As they were the only *live* people in sight, the voices followed them through the room with the couch and chair and out into the front room of the funeral home. Tom tried to tune them out and engage in conversation with his mother and the funeral director knowing that he would soon be out the door. If he could make it just a few more minutes, he and his mother would leave – and hopefully none of the spirits would follow them.

After writing the deposit check and signing all the paperwork, Tom and his mother were ready to leave. They thanked the funeral director and he escorted them to the door. They walked out onto the big covered porch and the door closed behind them cutting off the voices. Tom let out a huge sigh of relief and briefly looked back at the door as he helped his mother down the steps.

“Tom, what in the world is going on with you?” his mother asked when they reached the bottom of the stairs and turned onto the sidewalk leading to the parking area.

“Shh. I'll tell you in the car, okay?” he whispered in response to her question and hurried his mother to where the car was parked. He unlocked the car and opened the passenger side door for his mother and helped her inside. After closing the door, Tom walked around the car and got into the driver's seat. His mother was curiously watching him as he clicked his seatbelt and started the car but she didn't say anything.

When they were safely on the road, Tom glanced toward his mother to see her still watching him. He looked in the rearview mirror – half expecting to see someone there – then he silently reprimanded himself for being silly. He could hear them, but he couldn't *see* them, so even if a spirit had gotten into the car with them he wouldn't know it unless the spirit was speaking. He gave his head a quick shake, dispelling the notion of seeing a dead person in the backseat, then he looked over at his mother.

“Mom,” he began, “I didn't want to say anything before but...”

“You're hearing them,” she said matter-of-factly. “The voices, I mean.”

Surprised, Tom said, “Yes. I tried not to let on because I'm afraid that if I do they'll start following me.”

“Smart. You're probably right,” she agreed. “Is it awful, Tom?”

“Well, I just wasn't expecting it, you know? I mean, I can hear the voices in the cemetery but I never imagined that I would be able to hear them other places, too. It totally took me by surprise – I mean, the other night at the hospital when I heard them I was too numb with shock to even think about it. I just sort of blocked it out with my grief I guess. But just now, in there...” he trailed off with a shrug.

“You poor thing!” his mother said sympathetically, but then she added hopefully, “I don't suppose you heard your father in there?”

Tom shook his head sadly, “No. I haven't heard anything more from dad. I think he moved on right after he spoke to me in the kitchen.”

“Ah well, I just thought I'd ask,” his mother said with a sigh. After a moment she asked, “Tom, do you think the funeral service will be too much for you? Being in the funeral home again, I mean? Because you don't have to...”

“Yes mom, I do have to be there. There's no way I would let you go through that alone. Don't you worry about me, I'll just have to ignore them like I did today. It'll be fine,” Tom told her, even though he wasn't looking forward to going back to the funeral home and being surrounded by the voices again. He wondered how much worse it would be when there were more *live* people in the funeral home besides just the two of them. How many spirits were out there following their loved ones around – hoping to communicate with them – that might come to his dad's funeral service attached to someone, as it were, and add to the voices that were already there today?

He drove along contemplating this question and wondering how he was going to be able to deal with all that noise. At least they'd opted not to have a visitation the day before the service and he would just have to be there the day of the funeral. This thought reminded him of the cost of the funeral and he made a mental note to discuss the financial aspect of it with his mother as soon as they got home. He turned onto his mother's street and drove the final two blocks to his parents' house in silence before parking the car in the driveway and going around to help his mother out of the car.

* * * *

The case was going nowhere. It had been determined that the girl had been stabbed with three different knives with the wounds going from tentative stabs to deep, penetrating wounds. The stab wounds hadn't killed her, however. The thing that had killed her was a deep cut that severed her femoral artery. There would have been a lot of blood, but there'd been no blood where the girl had been found. The body had been thoroughly cleaned before being dumped. She'd also been raped – possibly many times as there was recent bruising as well as older bruising – but there'd been no semen or other physical evidence besides the bruising and tears associated with being brutally assaulted. It was suspected the perp had worn a condom during the assaults.

The only thing the lab had given them that was of any use was a few fibers found from the rope that had been used to bind the girl's wrists. Unfortunately, the fibers had been matched to a pretty standard type of rope that was available at any hardware or big-box store in the city making it next to impossible to pinpoint where the perp had purchased the rope. Since there was very little forensic evidence to go on, and their second canvass had turned up no viable witnesses, it was looking like they were going to have to go through the tedious process of trying to track down every bit of comparable rope

that had been purchased in the city – and that would be a nightmare.

They were still going through missing persons' reports hoping to get a hit, but so far they hadn't identified the girl. There were so many missing girls! Art was frustrated. This girl was brutally raped and tortured before she was killed. He was worried the perp could just be getting started – and if that was the case, *that* could become a nightmare too.

The thought that the killer could just be getting started gave Art an idea. He turned to Michaels and said without preamble, "I had a thought."

"Well stop the presses! Art's had a thought!" Michaels joked. "What's on your mind?"

"I think we need to check around, see if there are any other cases similar to this one. Maybe this guy has done this before."

"Right. That actually sounds like a good idea. I'll get on that now," Michaels said as he swiveled in his chair and his hands went to his keyboard. Art picked up his phone and started making calls.

CHAPTER 12

"I love you, Tom," Rosalie said as she leaned over him and bent to place her soft, warm lips to his.

As she pulled away, Tom heard his father's voice. "Tom?"

"Yes, dad, I'm here." It was just he and his father now; Rosalie was gone.

"Where's your mother?"

"I think she's still sleeping."

"When she wakes up, tell her I love her."

"I will, dad."

"You're a good son, Tom."

Tom stood awash in bright light and his father was gone as if he'd never been there. He was in the back yard looking at his mother's clothesline. There was a row of birds perched along the line chirping noisily, seemingly unconcerned that Tom stood nearby. The sun was shining brightly in the blue sky and he couldn't remember the colors having ever looked so vivid.

He woke to the sound of birds loudly chirping and sunlight streaming through his bedroom window. He turned to reach for Rosalie in that sleep-veiled moment before remembering that she was gone. In that split second after waking from his dream, Tom had forgotten that Rosalie was no longer with him. Sadness filled his heart, as it did many mornings since he'd lost his wife, but it was even greater now that he'd lost his father as well. Tom lay thinking of his dream and trying to recall the touch of Rosalie's lips as she kissed him. He often dreamed of her and wondered if it was possible that she actually did come to him in his sleep to tell him that she loved him.

He rolled to the edge of the bed and sat up. Today was his father's funeral and he dreaded it for more than the obvious reasons. It would be difficult saying goodbye to his father, but at least he would have the opportunity to say goodbye. He hadn't been given that opportunity when Rosalie had died; he'd been in a coma and completely oblivious to the fact that she

was gone. Her parents had taken her from the hospital and quietly buried her with no funeral service or memorial of any kind. When Tom had taken Rosalie's hand just before they stepped off the curb in front of the movie theater that night, he hadn't known he would never see his beloved wife again.

What would he have said to her in that moment had he known it was the last they would ever have together? I love you? You are the best thing that has ever happened to me? Tom didn't know what he would have said. The truth was, he told her those things constantly over the years they were together. He knew that Rosalie had known exactly how he felt about her – and he knew exactly how she had felt about him. He still knew. She still told him often enough in his dreams. But knowing she loved him didn't fill the empty hole in his heart; the huge void in his life. It didn't stop him yearning to hear her voice and it didn't take the place of feeling her touch and seeing her smile.

As he sat on the edge of the bed thinking of Rosalie, his father's words from the dream came back to him. He would have to tell his mother about the dream and what his father had said. Tom thought his father's words might comfort his mother today. He stood up and grabbed his robe and quietly made his way down the hall to the bathroom to take a shower. It was strange – yet comforting and familiar – to be staying here in his parents' house again. He was careful to push the bathroom door closed with his big toe because otherwise you had to practically slam it to get it to close and he didn't want to make too much noise and wake his mother.

Tom stood under the spray of the shower and worried about the spirits that would be at the funeral home today. He knew he had to be vigilant in pretending he couldn't hear them. But what if he accidentally acknowledges one? What if he hears someone speaking to him from behind and he turns to respond and finds no one there? He doesn't want to give himself away and take the chance of any wandering spirits starting to follow him around because they've discovered he can hear them.

Helping the souls under his care at Oak Lawn is one thing – having a multitude of spirits in limbo seeking him out would be quite another, and something that he definitely didn't want.

After showering and throwing on jeans and a t-shirt, Tom went downstairs – carefully avoiding the creak on the third step down – to put some coffee on. He didn't hear any sounds from his mother's room and assumed she was still asleep. Tom was an early riser, but his mother wasn't and he wanted her to get as much rest as possible because he knew today would be a long and difficult day for her. It would be a long and difficult day for him, as well.

Once the coffee was brewing, Tom pulled eggs and bacon from the refrigerator and began making breakfast. By the time things were well underway and he'd just put bread in the toaster, the kitchen door swung open and his mother came in.

"I hope I didn't wake you, mom," Tom apologized.

"No, dear. I've been awake for quite some time, I just wasn't ready to get out of bed. But I finally decided it would do me no good to lay there any longer avoiding this day."

Tom crossed the room and gave his mother a hug. She hugged him tightly in return then let go and said, "Don't burn your breakfast now."

Tom went back to the stove and turned off the burner under the eggs before lifting the pan off and setting it on an unlit burner. "Would you like to have the first batch? I can make more if you..."

"No. I think I'll just have some toast and coffee. I don't really feel too much like eating this morning."

"Okay. Why don't you grab that toast when it pops up and I'll put down two more slices," Tom suggested.

When the toast popped up, his mother pulled a saucer and the butter dish from the cupboard and took the toast to the table where she sat down and began spreading butter over the browned bread. When the coffee pot finished brewing, she got up and took out two coffee mugs, filled them each with

coffee, and carried them back to the table where Tom was just sitting down to his bacon and eggs.

"Does it ever get easier, Tom? I mean, waking up knowing you're on your own now?" she asked.

Tom reached out and took her hand quietly responding, "It gets easier, but I still miss Rosalie every single day." His mother sighed and Tom lifted his hand from hers so she could sit down.

"I had a dream this morning," Tom said. "And dad was there." His mother looked up, interested, and he went on, "He asked me to tell you that he loves you."

His mother's mouth curved into a small smile and water filled her eyes as she said, "Thank you, Tom. I really needed to hear that this morning."

* * * *

Tom's apprehension continued to grow as he and his mother slowly drove the few blocks to the funeral home. His agitation showed as his fingers tapped out a staccato rhythm on the steering wheel. His mother reached out and placed her hand on his arm to still his drumming.

"Are you okay, Tom?"

"Yes... well... no. Not really. I'm just nervous about going back to the funeral home," he explained.

"The voices?" his mother asked, and he nodded. "I'm so sorry, dear. This day is going to be hard enough without you having to deal with *that* as well. Is there anything I can do?"

"Thanks, mom. But I don't think so. Just ignore me if I seem to be distant or slow in responding, okay?" She promised him that she would before making him promise that if things got too bad for him during the service that he would get up and leave. As they pulled into a parking spot near the entrance of the funeral home, Tom assured her that he would.

He turned to his mother and asked, "Are you ready?"

"As ready as I'll ever be, I guess," she replied.

Tom switched off the engine and got out of the car. He walked around to help his mother out and the two of them walked toward the front steps leading up to the big covered porch of the funeral home. The pre-service visitation wouldn't begin for over an hour yet, but they'd wanted to come early so they could say their private goodbyes before anyone else arrived.

Tom's mother held his arm as they walked up the steps. She looked up at him and whispered, "Anything yet?"

He shook his head no, somewhat relieved but still filled with trepidation. As they crossed the porch to the front door, a young woman that Tom recognized as an employee of the funeral home opened the door just as they reached it. She invited them in and held the door open for them as they went inside. After closing the door behind them, the young woman introduced herself, expressed condolences for their loss, and told them that if they needed anything at all today to please let her know. She led them across the lobby to a pedestal that held the guestbook, somberly explaining that guests would have an opportunity to sign the guestbook as they entered, then she led them into the viewing room where chairs were arranged in rows facing the casket which was at the far end of the room. She excused herself and quietly left them.

Tom had begun hearing the voices as soon as they'd crossed the threshold of the front door. They were so loud and insistent that it was difficult for Tom to hear what the young woman had been quietly saying to them as she'd shown them in. As he and his mother stood there looking beyond the rows of chairs to where his father was lying at the other end of the room, Tom was suddenly overcome with grief. In that moment it was as if his grief pulled a heavy cloak around his ears and the voices suddenly became distant and muffled. Absorbed as he was in the pain he was feeling, Tom hardly noticed.

His mother reached out and took his hand, but she made no move toward her husband. Tom gave her hand a gentle squeeze then led his mother past the rows of chairs

toward the casket where his father, eyes closed and hands crossed over his waist, lie still and lifeless. As they approached the casket, Tom's mother released his hand and went forward. She began to cry as she stood looking down at her husband's body. There was a box of tissue on a nearby table and Tom grabbed some and handed took them to his mother. She quietly thanked him before turning back to her husband. Reaching out a hand, she touched his face; ran her hand gently over his brow. She was whispering words of love and devotion to her dead husband and Tom suddenly felt like an intruder. He took a few steps back then turned and went to the couch that had been placed for the family in front of the first row of chairs. He sat down and allowed his mother to say her goodbyes.

Tom knew that his father was no longer with them, and that his lifeless body was just that – an empty, lifeless shell – but even so, he began to whisper to his father, too, as his mother was doing.

"You were the best dad I could ever have hoped for. I will miss you so much. Thank you for being my dad," Tom whispered as his own tears began to fall.

* * * *

Cloaked in his grief Tom made it through the visitation, and then the service, without being too bothered by the voices. He felt numb in his bereavement and the numbness somehow quieted the voices; made them sound far, far away. Afterward, as he and his mother drove home, it occurred to him to briefly wonder about that. He didn't understand it, but he was grateful for it – even if he wasn't grateful for the grief that he felt. Perhaps he would be able to find a way to tune the voices out if, and when, he was ever confronted with them in the future. For now, though, he was simply glad this day was coming to an end.

When they arrived home, Tom helped his mother out

of the car before parking it in the garage and following her into the house. Before he could close the door behind them, he heard someone calling his name and turned in the direction of the voice, half dreading there would be no one there, but instead he saw their next door neighbor coming up the back steps with a casserole dish in her hands.

"Hello Tom," the neighbor greeted him and he smiled and said hello in response, holding the door open for her to come inside. "It was a lovely service today," she said kindly as she came into the kitchen. "I'm sorry to bother the two of you – I'm sure you must be exhausted – but when I got home earlier, some of the neighbors started bringing food to my house because you weren't home yet."

Tom's mother took the casserole dish from her hands and set it down on the table, thanking her for bringing it over and giving her friend a hug. The woman told her there were several more over at her house and told them she would bring the others over, too. Tom volunteered to help her while his mother began rearranging the contents of the refrigerator to make room for the casserole.

By the time they'd made three trips back and forth from the neighbor's house, the kitchen table was covered with casserole dishes and big Tupperware containers filled with everything from lasagna to brownies to pigs in a blanket. Their neighbor quickly excused herself, hugging first Tom and then his mother, saying she would get out of their way. She knew they were both exhausted and didn't want to keep them.

After the neighbor was gone, Mrs. Connor sat down at the table and looked up at Tom and asked, "What in the world are we going to do with all this food?"

Tom laughed and responded, "Eat it!"

He pulled two forks from the silverware drawer and handed one to his mother then he sat down and opened the container of brownies. His mother smiled and shook her head, she got up and poured two glasses of milk before sitting back down. Picking up her fork, she dug into a brownie. It had been

a long, emotional, and exhausting day and she was glad it was almost over.

"Your father always loved brownies," she said wistfully.

"I know," Tom said. "Remember the first day I came here and you gave me brownies?"

His mother nodded and smiled at the memory. "Your father and I were *so* nervous and excited that day! We were so afraid that you wouldn't like us, and we were so hoping that you would give us a chance."

"That was the best day of my life," Tom said and smiled as he recalled the day he'd first come to live with the Connors.

"Ours, too," his mother agreed.

"Well... until Rosalie, that is," he qualified, making his mother laugh.

"Of course!" she said and smiled at him fondly as he sat eating another bite of brownie. She sighed then and said, "I guess we'll have to make room for most of this food in the freezer." She got up and opened the freezer, shuffled a few things around, then put a couple of food containers into the kitchen freezer before instructing Tom to go down to the basement freezer and see how much room there was in that one.

CHAPTER 13

Tom stayed with his mother for the next few weeks until she told him she felt she was ready to be on her own then he packed up his things and went home. He was glad to get back to his cottage and eager to settle back into his normal routine. Two days after he'd come back home, Jenny came to see him.

"Hi Tom!" Jenny called out and waved to him as she came walking down the little dirt lane after visiting her mother's grave.

Tom looked up and waved in return. He was happy to see the girl again. Unless people came back to thank him after-the-fact for delivering a message (after they came to believe the message was genuine), he rarely had people seek him out. Although quite some time had passed since he'd last seen Jenny, Tom found it a pleasant surprise to see her again. He brushed the dirt off his hands and wiped them on the rag hanging from his pocket as Jenny approached.

"Tom," Jenny said soberly when she reached him. "I heard about your dad. I'm really sorry. Are you okay?"

Tom was touched by her concern and responded, "Yes. I'm okay. It was hard at first, but you know..." he trailed off and shrugged his shoulders.

"I know," she said sadly. "But I'm glad you're doing okay" she said sympathetically. Then her face suddenly brightened, and she said, "Hey! Guess what?"

"What?"

"I found my great-grandmother Mamie's diary just where she said it would be. I've read it and it's fascinating! As it turns out, she was a musician just like me!"

"That's great, Jenny! I'm sure she would be pleased. I'm glad you were able to find it."

"Yeah, thanks to you!" She smiled and he nodded. "It's interesting, all the stuff she wrote about. It's like I feel a real connection with her, you know? And finding out she was a

musician too is really cool!"

"Yes, it is. Very cool," Tom agreed, pleased that Jenny was so excited. It was gratifying to know that his communications with the dead were sometimes appreciated and helpful to the living.

"Oh, and guess what else," Jenny asked brightly.

Tom chuckled and asked, "What else?"

"My cousin, Greg... I'm sure you remember him, right?"

"Unfortunately, yes, I do," Tom responded with a slight grimace. "What about him?"

"Well, he got into trouble again and I thought you'd be happy to know that he's gone away from Bright Creek. My uncle made him join the army; said it would teach him some discipline and straighten him out." She smiled broadly and continued, "So he won't be around bothering you!"

"Well that's interesting news. I actually haven't seen him around since the night I told him what your grandma said..."

"And now you won't be seeing him around for a long time. Hopefully when he gets back, he won't be such a big jerk anymore. Maybe the army will turn him into a productive member of society, as my uncle says," Jenny said and smiled brightly.

"One can only hope," Tom responded.

"Anyway, I can see you're busy, so I better let you get back to work. I'm only here for the weekend, but I'll be back tomorrow before I go back home. Maybe I'll see you then?"

"I'll be around," Tom said and smiled. "It's nice to see you again, Jenny."

"Thanks. It's nice to see you too, Tom. Hopefully I'll see you tomorrow," she said before turning to leave. She took a few steps then turned and said, "Bye Tom."

"Bye Jenny."

Tom went back to his work as Jenny walked down the road and out of the cemetery. *She's a nice girl, isn't she Tom?* a

voice he recognized as Mr. McCorkle said.

"Yes, she is," Tom agreed as he grabbed his hedge clippers and put them into the wheelbarrow. He grabbed the handles of the wheelbarrow and started pushing it across the road.

It's nice that you can hear us now, Tom. You're a nice young man and I enjoy talking to you. And I admire what you do for the folks here that have messages to pass on.

"Thanks, Mr. McCorkle. I appreciate that," Tom said as he came up over the hill and turned toward the twin oaks.

"I'm sorry, were you speaking to me?" A man appeared from behind a gravestone nearly making Tom jump out of his skin as the thought popped into his head that now he was *seeing* the dead as well as hearing them.

After regaining his composure, Tom replied, "Uh, no. Just talking to myself. I'm sorry if I disturbed you."

The man gave Tom an irritated look before turning away and muttering, "Nut case," and disappearing behind the gravestone again.

* * * *

The following day Tom was leveling the ground where someone had parked their car, leaving tire tracks sunken into the grass. When he happened to glance up, he saw Jenny heading his way. He lifted a hand and waved then pulled a bag of grass seed from the wheelbarrow and began scattering seed around the bare patches of ground. He grabbed his watering can from the wheelbarrow and soaked the freshly laid grass seed. By the time Jenny reached him, he was sprinkling straw over the seeded area.

"Hi Tom," Jenny said as she approached. "Whatcha doing?"

"Just fixing the grass where somebody left tire tracks. How are you today, Jenny?"

"I'm good. Just visiting my mom's grave. It's weird,

even though I know she's not really here, it still makes me feel closer to her when I come here, ya know?"

"Yep. It's not that weird, though. Lots of people feel that way," Tom said. "I think that's probably the reason so many souls stay around here after they've passed – because people come here to visit them," he told her.

"We used to come here a lot before we moved," Jenny sighed. "Where we live now is nice, but it's not where we lived with mom, ya know? It's just not the same there as it was when we still lived in our house here. In some ways, it's better that way – but in others... She's just not *there* like she was in the house here, ya know?"

"Yes. I understand. I don't know how I would feel if I ever moved from the cottage where Rosalie and I lived together. I'm sure it couldn't have been easy for you and your family – moving away from where you lived with your mom, leaving your friends and starting at a new school and everything."

"Yeah, it was pretty tough at first. My new school is okay, though. It's bigger and there are a lot more kids, but I still get to see my old friends sometimes, plus I've made some pretty cool new friends. And in a couple of weeks I'll get my driver's license – and then I'll be able to come back to Bright Creek all the time. Smith Falls won't seem quite as far away when I'll be able to drive here myself, whenever I want to."

"Well congratulations! Getting your license is a big deal. I remember when I first got mine, my dad let me drive up to the lake that summer. I felt so grown up," he laughed at the memory.

"I can't wait to get mine!" Jenny said enthusiastically. "My dad did let me drive to Bright Creek this weekend because I have my learner's permit – but it will be so much different when I can actually drive without my dad in the car."

"Well you be careful Jenny, when you do get your license, okay?" Tom advised.

"I will," she promised.

Tom picked up the handles of the wheelbarrow and he and Jenny walked through the cemetery toward the shed.

“Tom?” Jenny asked as they walked along.

“Yes?”

“I was just wondering...” She hesitated before continuing, “...well, I was wondering about your dad. Is he buried here? Did he talk to you after he died?”

“Yes. He’s buried right down there.” Tom said and tilted his head in the direction of his father’s grave. “And yes. He did speak to me after he died.”

“What happened? What did he say?” Jenny asked with interest. “Sorry... I mean... only if you want to tell me – but you don’t have to...”

“It’s okay, I don’t mind telling you,” Tom said as he steered the wheelbarrow to a stop near the shed. He set it down and let go of the handles then turned toward Jenny and explained, “I was at my parents’ house for Sunday dinner and after dinner, we were watching a football game. My dad got up to go get us a couple of beers from the kitchen while my mother and I stayed in the living room. We heard a crash and ran into the kitchen to see what had happened and there he was, sprawled out on the kitchen floor in a puddle of beer. He was already dead.”

“Wow. It happened that fast? I’m so sorry, Tom!” Jenny said, her eyes wide with shock.

“Thank you. Anyway, that was when he spoke to me. He basically told me that he loved us and he was sorry he had to leave us, then he was gone.”

“Oh wow,” Jenny said, her shock turning to awe. “It’s so cool that he talked to you after – and so cool that you can hear spirits. You know that, right? It’s majorly *cool*!”

“I don’t know about that,” Tom replied. “It’s more of a curse most of the time. People have always thought I was weird – and now... well...”

“You’re not weird, Tom, you’re just a regular guy. Anybody who thinks you’re weird just doesn’t know you.”

Tom laughed and said, “I’m sure *you* thought I was weird – just like everybody else – didn’t you?”

Jenny blushed and responded, “Well, yeah. Okay, you got me there. But now that I’ve actually gotten to know you, I don’t think you’re weird. I think you’re really interesting... and nice, too!”

“Thanks, Jenny,” Tom said quietly. “That means a lot.”

Sensing his discomfort, Jenny changed the subject. “Hey, did you hear about that missing girl? Nancy Wilcox?”

This question brought back to mind the flier he’d seen on the utility pole the day his father died. Tom hadn’t given it another thought after the events of that day.

“Yes. I did see a poster the day my dad died. I’d forgotten about it. Have they found her? Is she okay?” he asked.

“No. They haven’t found her. Some of my friends think she ran away, but my dad says her family hasn’t heard anything from her and they think someone may have kidnapped her or something.”

“I certainly hope she’s okay and they find her soon,” Tom said with concern. “You should be careful, Jenny. Just in case, I mean.”

“Yes. I know. My dad has already talked to me about it. Speaking of my dad, I better get back to my uncle’s house before he sends out a search party or something,” she joked. “We’re heading back home soon.”

“Okay,” Tom said. “You take care of yourself, Jenny.”

“I will. You too, Tom. See ya.”

“Bye.”

Tom unloaded the wheelbarrow and put everything away in the shed before upending the wheelbarrow against the wall of the shed and covering it with a tarp. He looked up to see where the sun was and deciding that it was way past lunchtime, so he headed for the cottage to clean up and fix himself a late lunch.

A couple of weeks later, Tom stood unobtrusively leaning against a tree watching the burial crew as they dug a fresh grave. He wasn't involved in this part of the process and the burial crew, like most people, tended to avoid him beyond giving him the courtesy of letting him know when and where they would be digging a new grave. He never bothered them while they were working, but he often stood by and watched. He felt it was his duty to make sure they respected the surrounding gravesites and didn't disturb or damage any of the existing graves. Besides, it was interesting watching them work. It wasn't often that he got this kind of break in his routine at Oak Lawn.

Tom wondered who would be buried in the new grave. There had been a message on his machine letting him know there would be a burial service two days from now but they typically didn't tell him who was being buried. He didn't get the local newspaper and he wasn't exactly in the loop with local gossip, but he thought his mother would probably know who'd died recently and he made a mental note to call her later and ask. For now, he stood in the shade and watched the backhoe as it pulled dirt from the ground. He had to admit, these guys were good at digging graves, even in winter when the ground was frozen. They were very precise and Tom appreciated that.

When the hole had been dug and the dirt and hole were covered, the burial crew left the cemetery. They waved at Tom as they left and he waved back. The diggers rarely spoke to Tom, but they always waved as if they were friends. Tom waited until they were out of sight before venturing closer to the new grave and inspecting the surrounding area. Everything looked fine and Tom was relieved.

Getting a new resident, eh Tom? It was Mr. McCorkle.

"Looks that way," Tom replied. "I wonder if it'll be a *talker* or not," he said and heard Andrew McCorkle laugh in

response.

It suddenly occurred to Tom that there might be "visiting" spirits in attendance at the upcoming burial service and he asked Mr. McCorkle if he would spread the word amongst the residents of Oak Lawn not to reveal to any visiting souls that Tom could communicate with them. He explained how he'd discovered that he could hear spirits outside of the cemetery – which had come as a surprise to him – and he didn't want any wandering souls to discover his ability to hear them and start flocking to Oak Lawn and talking to him day and night. Mr. McCorkle agreed that it would be a difficult thing for Tom to have to deal with, so he told Tom not to worry, that he would spread the word.

Satisfied that Mr. McCorkle would do what he'd asked, Tom thanked him then headed off to get the mower to start mowing. He wanted to get the cemetery ship-shape before the burial service two days from now; he would need to mow and trim before setting up the canopy and chairs at the graveside. The weather was forecast to be sunny and warm the rest of the week so at least he wouldn't have rain to contend with. Warm weather burials were usually the easiest – unless it happened to rain – so he was glad the forecast was clear.

* * * *

Two days later, Tom stood in the shade of a tree watching the burial service in the distance. His mind drifted back to the day of his father's burial. At the time, he'd never stopped to wonder who erected the canopy and arranged the chairs but now he wondered. Perhaps the digging crew had done it – as it certainly hadn't been Tom, himself. He would have to find out so he could thank whoever had taken care of it.

After finishing his work for the day on the day this new grave was dug, Tom had contacted his mother to find out if she knew who died. As he'd suspected she would, his mother

had known. As it turned out the missing girl, Nancy Wilcox, had been found dead – and she'd been murdered. Tom's mother told him the town was abuzz with speculation and gossip regarding what had happened to the girl. She told him the details of the girl's murder hadn't been released, as there was an ongoing investigation, and wild theories were being concocted by everyone in town.

There were a large number of mourners at the service today, and also several photographers and news crews scattered around the periphery. Uniformed Bright Creek Police officers were posted around the cemetery to keep the reporters from getting too close to the mourners. Tom was a fair distance from the spectacle watching as news vans, denied entry into the cemetery, were parked on the street outside broadcasting live feed of the reporters as they spoke in subdued tones with the burial service going on in the distance behind them. He'd never seen such a circus in all his years working at Oak Lawn.

When the service concluded, mourners were accosted by reporters as they left the burial site. Police officers interceded and blocked the reporters' access and by the time there was only a small group of mourners remaining at the gravesite, police officers had ushered the photographers and reporters out of the cemetery to prevent them from invading the family's privacy. The street outside the entrance to the cemetery was swarming with people and cars. Tom moved further away from the noise and commotion going on out in the street and moved closer to the small group of mourners who remained at the new grave. He stayed a respectful distance away, still in the shade of a tree, and waited. He would need to take down the canopy and the chairs after everyone left so the digging crew could come back to fill in the grave.

Tom waited patiently and watched as the small group began to break apart and people slowly moved from the gravesite to their cars. Suddenly a loud voice wailed, *why won't anybody listen to me?* Tom's head jerked up and he looked around,

searching for the source of the voice. Someone certainly was upset, but nobody seemed to care. The people moving away from the grave didn't react in any way as the wailing voice cried, *you have to listen! Mom! Dad! ANYBODY! Please listen to me! He's going to kill her too if you don't do something!*

Still no one reacted and it was then that Tom knew the voice belonged to the dead girl. She was going on and on – and she kept repeating, *he's going to kill her too*. Tom didn't know what to do. He looked around and wondered if he should find a police officer. But what would he say? He didn't know, but he had to say something to somebody, didn't he? He headed toward the first policeman he saw and as he drew closer, the policeman turned toward him and Tom recognized the face of the man who'd been in the cemetery the day Tom had been talking to Mr. McCorkle – the man that had called him a nut case. Tom quickly changed directions knowing this policeman would never believe him if he told the officer the dead girl had something to tell them.

Not knowing what else to do, Tom headed toward Andrew McCorkle's headstone. As he crossed through the cemetery, he heard Mr. McCorkle's voice. *We've got a talker, Tom. And a very upset one from the sound of it.*

"I know. Can you help me, Mr. McCorkle?"

"Of course, Tom. What would you like me to do?"

"Can you go talk to the girl? Calm her down? Tell her to stay here until everyone is gone? Tell her that I can talk to her if she waits until everyone is gone?"

"Don't you worry, Tom. I'll take care of it."

Tom didn't know if he should be getting involved, but he thought of Jenny, and he knew that if there was a chance that whoever had killed this girl would kill again, he had to risk it. He would find out what the girl could tell him, then he would decide what to do with the information. For now, he just needed Mr. McCorkle to make sure the girl's spirit didn't follow her family home. It was obvious none of them had the gift – or curse, depending on how you looked at it – of being

able to hear her and if she left with them, he wouldn't be able to help her. Tom was becoming more and more convinced that his ability to hear the dead *was* a curse.

* * * *

As the last car left the cemetery, Tom began folding and gathering the chairs. He hadn't heard from Mr. McCorkle, so all he could do was wait and hope he'd been successful in convincing the girl to stay so Tom could talk to her. As he was folding the last chair, he heard Andrew McCorkle's voice.

Tom, she's here with me. She was a tough opponent, but I wore her down and convinced her to come talk to you. Tom could hear amusement mixed with admiration in McCorkle's voice.

Can you really hear me? The girl's voice said. She sounded calmer now, but suspicious.

"Yes, Nancy. I can hear you. My name is Tom."

"Oh my god! You really can hear me! She started to cry then.

"Shh... it's okay," Tom said awkwardly.

I'm... I'm sorry. Nancy said between sniffles. *I'm just so relieved! For days, I've been trying to get someone – anyone – to listen. We have to help her! We have to help that other girl!* She was growing agitated again.

"Okay. Okay. Stay calm. Tell me what other girl you're talking about," Tom prodded. Nancy began to tell him and after a few minutes he stopped her so he could run home and get a notepad to take notes. McCorkle and Nancy followed him home (which was a new experience for Tom – at least he *thought* it was new...) where he sat at his kitchen table and took notes of everything Nancy told him. He wanted to make sure he got it all straight because listening to Nancy talk, he became convinced that he would need to take this information to the police. He only hoped that when he did, he wouldn't have to tell it to the policeman who'd called him a nut case. But he would cross that bridge if and when he came to it. For now, he wanted to get as much information as Nancy could provide.

He knew he might not get a second chance – for all he knew, the girl would move on as soon as she finished telling him because he was well aware souls often did move on immediately after relaying their messages to him.

When Nancy was through telling him everything she could, he asked her a few questions to clarify things in his mind, then asked her a few more to see if she could expand on what she'd already told him. Lastly, he asked if she could stay for a while before moving on to wherever souls went next in case the police had more questions. Nancy told him she wasn't sure; she didn't know what happened next. She said she hadn't even given it a moment's thought because she'd been so intent on trying to tell someone about the other girl. She told Tom she would try to stay if she could, but since she wasn't sure how the whole thing worked, she couldn't make any promises. Knowing this was the best he could hope for under the circumstances, Tom thanked her for talking with him and providing the information she'd been able to provide. He assured her he would take this information to the police (and silently prayed that the police would take him seriously).

CHAPTER 15

Art Hauxwell sat at his desk, going through homicide reports they'd received from other precincts trying to see if any of the victims were similar to their, as yet unidentified, vic. So far he'd found two that could possibly be related. Neither crime had been solved; both investigations were ongoing. He had a bad feeling that their perp had indeed done this before. When he came upon the third corresponding report – also unsolved and ongoing – he picked up his phone and called Michaels.

"Art, what's up?" Michaels asked when he answered the call.

"Could be at least three more victims similar to ours. Maybe more. I've still got a few more reports to go through. Where are you?"

"I'm tying up some loose ends on the case we just wrapped. I'm almost finished with the DA and I'll be back there as soon as I'm through."

"Okay. I'll see if I can get through the rest of these reports before you get here and then we can go over these possibles together."

"Sounds good," Michaels said and hung up.

Art hung up the phone and started reading the next report. He hoped he wouldn't find any more similar cases, but if he did, he hoped there was some good evidence they could tie into their case. By the time Michaels came in, he was looking over the last report in the pile and hadn't found any more cases that were similar to theirs.

"So what d'ya got?" Michaels asked him as he sat down at his desk and flipped on his computer.

"Three possibles going back about two years. Similar wounds; each body cleaned and left naked in an abandoned building; all three victims female between the ages of sixteen and twenty-three; two of them identified but the third – like our girl – as yet unidentified."

"I think you're right. Sounds like they could be related," Michaels said. "You make any calls yet?"

"No. Just finished the last report."

"Any of the cases in the same precinct?"

"Nope. All different. If it's the same perp, that's probably on purpose."

"Yeah, unfortunately if it is the same perp, he's got experience. Hand me a couple of those and let's start making calls."

Art handed him two of the reports and kept the third one for himself. Michaels picked up the phone and punched in a number while Art got up and went to take a piss. On his way back, he stopped for more coffee. When he got back to his desk, Michaels was deep in conversation with a detective in another precinct, comparing notes. Art sat down, picked up his own phone, and started dialing.

* * * *

Tom's mind was racing as he walked from the cemetery toward the police station. Bright Creek was a small community and its police force wasn't very big. Tom knew they must have called in every officer *and* the reserves to be at Nancy's funeral today. He hoped they weren't all still at the police station when he got there. He especially hoped he wouldn't have to talk to the officer that had called him a nut case – there were too many people in this town who thought he was crazy, he didn't need the police to be prejudiced against him as soon as he walked in the door.

Tom had never been in any trouble with the police. He'd never had so much as a parking ticket in all the years he'd lived in Bright Creek. He hoped the police would take him seriously when he passed along the information that Nancy had given him. He patted his shirt pocket (again) where he had the notes he'd taken to make sure they were still there. Satisfied they were there, his mind wandered to the things Nancy had

told him. He was fearful for the other girl that Nancy told him about. Nancy told him about the horrible things the man who abducted her had done to her and how she'd suffered for what must have been weeks at his hands before he'd finally killed her and Tom knew the man would do the same to the other girl he'd kidnapped. He *had* to get the police to listen to him – a girl's life depended on it.

The walk from the cemetery to the police station wasn't very far and Tom was there before he knew it. Once he actually saw the building looming in front of him, he began to sweat. He was filled with foreboding and apprehension at actually going inside. *Come on Tom! You have to do this! A girl's life depends on it!* he told himself as he stood there looking at the police station in front of him. He patted the notes in his pocket one last time, straightened his posture, then took a deep breath and walked to the big double doors and went inside.

A cool blast of air conditioning hit him as he walked through the doors. It was quiet inside and Tom let out the breath he hadn't realized he'd been holding. Steeling himself, he slowly walked up to the counter. He'd only been inside the police station once before, and that had been when he was in junior high school and his class had come to the police station on a field trip. They'd been given a tour of the station then they'd been given the opportunity to sit inside of a police car.

Approaching the counter, Tom saw a woman wearing a police uniform sitting behind a desk on the other side. There were three other desks in the large, open area, but they were unoccupied. The officer looked up as Tom came into her view and she stood and walked over to the counter to greet him. She asked how she could help him but before Tom could answer, a door off to the side of the big room opened and the officer who'd called Tom a nut case walked into the room. He briefly glanced over to the counter before disappearing around a corner.

Tom swallowed the lump that had formed in his throat at the sight of the man, then calmly told the woman he wanted

to speak to someone about Nancy Wilcox. She raised an eyebrow at him before asking his name, address, telephone number, and occupation and writing this information down on a form attached to a clipboard. When she asked Tom to take a seat while she went to get another officer to talk to him, he silently prayed that he wouldn't have to talk to the man who'd just disappeared around the corner.

Tom took a seat in one of the chairs that lined the small lobby area. He wiped his sweating palms on the legs of his pants and waited. A few minutes later, he heard a man call his name. "Mr. Hopkins?"

Tom looked up and let out a sigh of relief when he saw an older man, dressed in a uniform but sans tie and sleeves rolled up, expectantly looking out at him. He stood and said, "Yes. I'm Mr. Hopkins."

"Right this way, Mr. Hopkins," the officer said as he opened the little swinging door at the end of the counter and indicated that Tom should come through. Tom walked through the little door the man held open for him and the door swung shut behind him. The man led him through the area with the desks to a door that stood open at the back of the room. He waved Tom inside then followed, closing the door behind him.

"Please have a seat," the policeman said. There was a table in the middle of the room with a couple of chairs on either side. Tom sat down in the chair closest to the door and the police officer sat down opposite him.

"My name is Chief Creighton," he told Tom. "I see here," he said, looking at the form the policewoman had filled out, "That you're the caretaker at Oak Lawn Cemetery?"

"Yes," Tom responded.

"And you're here to talk about the girl that was buried today? Nancy Wilcox?"

"Yes."

"Okay, Mr. Hopkins, what would you like to discuss?" the man asked and after a few moments of hesitation, Tom

began to tell him.

"I know this is going to sound... uh... crazy, but I can hear – and talk to – the dead," Tom stated. Chief Creighton's eyebrows rose in incredulity but he didn't speak.

"Today, after the graveside service," Tom explained, "I talked to Nancy Wilcox."

* * * *

An hour later, after Tom had gone through his notes and told Chief Creighton everything that Nancy Wilcox had told him, and Creighton had asked Tom a plethora of questions, the policeman stood up and told Tom, "If you can just sit tight here for a little while Mr. Hopkins, I'd like to make some calls."

"Uh... of course," Tom said.

Chief Creighton nodded and left the room, closing the door behind him. Tom sat looking after him, wondering if Creighton had believed anything he'd said. On the plus side, he thought, the man hadn't said anything to make him feel as though he hadn't believed what he was telling him – but on the minus side, the man's facial expressions had registered a measure of doubt. For all Tom knew, Chief Creighton could be outside right now calling someone to come haul him away to the looney bin. He sat wringing his hands nervously and hoping the Chief of the Bright Creek Police had believed his story.

Tom didn't wear a watch, so he had no idea how much time was passing as he sat there waiting for Chief Creighton to come back, but it seemed like he sat waiting for a very long time. There were no windows in the room, so he couldn't gauge time by the sun as he usually did when he was working outside at Oak Lawn. It was about two o'clock when he'd arrived at the police station and he hadn't taken the time to eat lunch before coming straight here after talking with Nancy. His stomach started growling and he needed to pee, but he was

reluctant to open the door and ask to use the bathroom – or to leave. When he was nearly bursting with the need to relieve himself, the door finally opened and Chief Creighton came back in carrying a cup of coffee and a donut wrapped in a napkin. Creighton placed these on the table in front of Tom and sat down.

“I’m sorry to keep you waiting so long, Mr. Hopkins,” he began, “But I’ve been on the phone trying to get in touch with the detectives who are investigating the Nancy Wilcox case. I’m just waiting for them to call me back and it’s taking some time. I thought you might like coffee and a donut while you’re waiting.”

“Thanks,” Tom said, then he asked if he could use the bathroom.

“Oh. Yes. Of course,” Chief Creighton said. “I’ll send someone right in to show you to the restroom. I know you’ve been waiting for a while now, but would you mind, very much, if I asked you to stay here a bit longer until I hear back from the investigating detectives? Of course, you’re free to leave if you need to, but I would really appreciate it if you could be here when I talk to them – in case they have any questions?”

Wanting to be as helpful as possible, Tom agreed that he could stay a while longer. Chief Creighton thanked him and left the room. Seconds later, the officer who’d called Tom a nut case appeared in the doorway.

“If you’ll follow me, *sir*,” the man said condescendingly and Tom stood up. The officer led Tom out the door, through the open area with the desks, and down a hallway to the men’s room. He waited outside while Tom went in and used the facilities. When Tom came out, the officer stood waiting; arms crossed and leaning against the wall. He led Tom back to the room where the coffee and donut sat waiting and asked Tom if he wanted a sandwich or something. When Tom declined, he told Tom to suit himself, then he left the room and closed the door behind him.

Chief Creighton looked up from his desk when the

other officer walked into his office saying, “Chief, you know you got that weird guy from down at the cemetery in there, right? What’d he do? Kill somebody?”

“Hanson, I hope you don’t go around joking about things like that in public. You’ll set us up to get sued one of these days if you aren’t careful with your mouth,” Creighton chastised.

“Sorry Chief,” Hanson said. “What’s he in for?”

“Claims he can talk to dead people. Says the dead Wilcox girl gave him information regarding her abduction and murder. I’m trying to get in touch with the investigating detectives over in Smith Falls to find out if anything this guy told me is relevant to their investigation,” Creighton responded.

“That so? Well I think the guy’s probably a total crackpot. He has a reputation around town, you know. No way he can talk to dead people. What a bunch of baloney! What does he think this is, a movie?” he paused then added, “Unless he’s involved...” he said, raising his eyebrows in speculation.

Before Creighton could respond, his phone rang. He waved the other officer away and picked it up.

* * * *

Michaels hung up and waited for Art to finish his call. Art looked up at him and said into the telephone, “Yeah, it sure sounds like it. I think we’d better meet and go over some things.”

Michaels’ eyebrows rose in question and Art nodded at him as he wrapped up his conversation. “Sounds good,” he said. “We’ll see you then.”

Art hung up the phone and told Michaels, “It sounds like we’ve got a serial killer on our hands. What’d you find out?”

“Same as you. I said we’d swing by their precincts to compare notes in more detail.”

"Okay, but I think we'd better call everyone back and have them all come here so we can discuss this all together," Art suggested.

"I agree," Michaels said as he picked up his phone and started dialing. Before Art could do the same, he heard a voice call out his name and turned to see Smitty heading his way.

"Looks like we've got an ID," Smitty said when he reached Art's desk. "Her name is Heidi Beauchamp and she's been missing for about six weeks." He handed Art a sheet of paper with the girl's picture on it. "Last seen wearing a charm bracelet with a shamrock on it – which sounds like a match. You want me to go visit the parents? Bring them in to make a positive ID?"

"Yeah," Art said as he looked at the photo and recognized their victim. "And let me know when you've got the ID. This case is starting to get real ugly. We'll fill you in when you get back."

CHAPTER 16

"Okay, will do," Chief Creighton said. "Yep. See you then."

He hung up the phone and sighed. He certainly didn't like to give credence to local gossip, but there was something odd about this guy Tom Hopkins. Maybe what Hanson had said earlier about Hopkins either being a total crackpot or being involved in the Wilcox girl's murder had merit. The detective over in Smith Falls seemed very tight-lipped about what Creighton had just relayed to him, but he was *very* interested in coming out to Bright Creek to talk to Tom Hopkins. Creighton had agreed to hold Tom here until the detective could get here.

He got up from his desk and headed back toward the room where Tom Hopkins sat waiting. As soon as he walked out of his office, Officer Hanson – who'd been leaning against the front counter – came toward him asking questions.

"What did they say? Is he involved? Should I arrest him and read him his rights?"

"Slow down, Hanson." Creighton responded. "The detective in Smith Falls is coming out to interview Mr. Hopkins himself. We're just going to ask him to stay here to talk with the detective. Nothing more. Why don't you go over to Polly's and bring him back a sandwich."

Clearly disappointed, Hanson grabbed his hat and left in a huff. Creighton ignored Hanson's dramatic exit and continued on his way to the room where Tom Hopkins was waiting. When he opened the door, Tom looked up at him expectantly.

"Can I go home now?" Tom asked.

"You're free to go any time, Mr. Hopkins. However, if you could stay a bit longer there is a detective on his way from Smith Falls to discuss the things you told me earlier. It would be really helpful if you could be here to talk to him and answer any questions he might have?" Creighton said, posing it as a

question.

"Oh. Okay. Sure. If it'll help," Tom replied as his stomach growled. He glanced down at his rumbling stomach then looked back up at Chief Creighton, somewhat embarrassed. "Sorry. I skipped lunch today because I wanted to get down here as soon as possible after what Nancy told me."

"No need to apologize," Creighton said. "I just sent someone out to get you a sandwich. I appreciate you staying to talk with the investigating detective. I'm sure it'll be really helpful to the investigation."

"I hope so," Tom said. "Nancy was really insistent about the other girl. I hope we're able to save her."

"Me too," Creighton agreed. "It shouldn't be long before the detective gets here, so just sit tight and I'll send that sandwich in to you as soon as it gets here."

* * * *

Tom sat eating his sandwich and wondering what time it was. He hadn't finished his work for the day – he hadn't even put away the chairs he'd folded or the canopy from the graveside service. The digging crew would be irritated with him for not clearing the way for the burial. Tom hadn't thought, he'd just left everything; he'd gone back to the cottage to take down notes as Nancy told him her story, then he'd come straight to the police station to relay Nancy's words. Nothing else had mattered in the moment except saving the other girl that Nancy said was in the back of her abductor's van when he dumped her body.

When the sandwich was gone and his stomach satisfied, Tom cleaned up the wrappings and napkin and put them in the bag the sandwich was delivered in. He'd only the last cold dregs of coffee left in his cup to wash down his meal and he drank them down before putting the styrofoam cup into the bag as well. Looking around for a wastebasket, he saw there

was none – in fact, there was nothing in the room except the table and four chairs. Tom walked to the door and turned the knob but found it locked. Thinking it must have been locked by accident, Tom timidly knocked on the door. When no one came, he knocked louder.

A few minutes later, the door was opened from the other side and the policewoman looked in. "Is there something that you need Mr. Hopkins?" she asked politely.

"Uh... just looking for a waste basket," Tom explained as he held up the bag. The woman smiled and held out her hand and Tom handed her the bag.

"Thank you," she said. Then she asked, "Would you like more coffee while you're waiting? Or maybe water?"

"Uh, yes. Water would be nice," Tom said. "Do you have any idea how much longer I should wait? I have work to do back at the cemetery."

"Just let me get you that water and I'll see if I can find out, okay?"

"Okay. Thank you."

"No problem. Just take a seat and I'll be right back," she said kindly and smiled again.

Tom sat back down as she left the room and closed the door behind her. He was tempted to get up and check the door to see if it was locked, but then thought better of it. Chief Creighton had told him he was free to leave at any time – why would they lock him in? He decided it must have been an accident.

A moment later the door opened again and the policewoman came in with a bottle of water. She handed the bottle to Tom and told him, "It should just be a few more minutes until the detective from Smith Falls gets here. If you could just be patient a few minutes longer, I'm sure you'll be on your way soon."

Tom thanked her and she left the room – again closing the door behind her. He twisted the top off the bottle of water and took a long drink. Hopefully he wouldn't be here too much

longer. As long as there was still daylight left, he should be able to take care of everything back at the cemetery when he was finished here. The burial crew had most likely already been there to fill in the grave and they would have been forced to move the rest of the chairs and canopy out of their way, but that couldn't be helped. Tom would have to apologize later. He put the cap back on the water and continued to wait.

A few minutes later the door opened again and this time Chief Creighton came in followed by another man wearing a wrinkled suit. Creighton introduced the other man as Detective Young from the Smith Falls Police Department. Tom stood to shake the man's hand then they all sat down. Chief Creighton pulled out his notebook and began going over Tom's statement. Detective Young listened, and intermittently asked Tom questions. Tom took out his own notes as well, so he could be sure to give them the information exactly as Nancy had given it to him.

"So you say you got this information from Nancy Wilcox? The dead girl?" Detective Young asked.

"Yes."

"And you got it from her *after* she was dead?" he asked skeptically.

"Yes. She gave me the information earlier today. Actually, it was right after her family left the graveside service at the cemetery," Tom explained.

"And you've been able to talk to the dead your whole life, then?"

"Uh... no. Just since I was hit by a car a couple of years ago."

"Mr. Hopkins' wife was killed when they were both struck by a drunk driver," Chief Creighton provided.

"Yes. I was in a coma for a few days," Tom added. "And after I woke up, I started hearing voices out in the cemetery. It turned out the voices I was hearing were the voices of the dead who were buried there."

"I see," said Detective Young. He scribbled some

notes in his notebook before asking Tom a few more questions regarding the information Nancy had given him then he thanked Tom for coming forward with the information. He asked Tom if he could wait for a few more minutes while he and Chief Creighton stepped outside to confer and after Tom had agreed, the two men got up and left the room.

Once outside, Detective Young asked, "What's your impression? Do you think this guy is for real?"

"I don't know. He's always had a reputation around town as being somewhat strange, but I hadn't heard anything about him claiming to be able to talk to the dead. I know there are people who are supposedly able to do that kind of thing, but I've never met one. Do you think he's lying? I've checked his record and he's never been in any trouble before. Did he give you any useful information? Anything that might help the case?" Creighton asked.

"Let's just say that the information he just gave us is enough to make me think he's somehow involved in what happened to Nancy Wilcox. He has knowledge of details that weren't released. Either he really *can* talk to the dead, or he was involved in Nancy's murder – and I highly doubt he can talk to the dead. I'm going to need you to hold him while I check into some of the things he said."

"Okay, but you know how long I can keep him without charges, so keep me apprised of your progress," Creighton said. "I'll put him in a holding cell for as long as I can, but if you can't charge him..."

"Yeah, yeah. I know the drill. Just hold onto him and let me follow up on this information. If he is Nancy's killer, we don't want him out on the streets," Young said.

"Agreed. Let me know if there's anything else I can do to assist you in your investigation." The two men shook hands and Detective Young hurriedly left, excited to finally have something to investigate in an otherwise frustrating case.

* * * *

"Follow me Hopkins," Officer Hanson said when he walked into the room where Tom waited. Tom stood up and followed him out of the room.

"Am I free to go now?" Tom asked as Hanson led him toward the hallway where the restroom was located.

Hanson stopped just in front of the men's room and said, "I'm sure you need to relieve yourself. Hurry up."

"But..."

"Just go take a piss Hopkins," Hanson barked.

Tom did as he was told and went into the men's room. He did have to go again after a cup of coffee and a bottle of water and all that waiting, so he relieved himself then washed his hands. After drying them, he stepped back out into the hall. He could see through the window that it was after dark. He thought he'd been waiting for quite a while, but hadn't realized just how long he'd actually been sitting in that room until he saw how dark it was outside.

"I really have to get going now..." Tom said.

"Sorry pal. You're not going anywhere just now. Chief says you gotta stay here overnight."

"But..."

"That way, *please*," Hanson pointed further down the hall and indicated with his head that Tom should lead the way.

Confused, Tom led the way down the hallway and Hanson followed. "Turn right at the next hall," Hanson instructed.

Tom tried to turn and talk to the officer, "I don't understand. Chief Creighton said I was free to go any time and I..."

"Yeah? Well he changed his mind. You're going to be staying here for a while. Stop here." Tom stopped in front of a door and Hanson pulled a keyring from his belt and slid a key into the lock. There was a loud *click* then Hanson pushed the heavy door open and gave Tom a little shove. "Inside."

Tom stepped inside and found himself standing next

to a desk. Further beyond and down a short hallway he could see jail cells. "Wait! There must be some kind of mistake!" he protested.

"Nope. No mistake. Chief says you gotta stay here *under our protection* until further notice," Hanson said as he prodded Tom forward and they stopped in front of the first of two cells. He chose another key from his keyring and opened the cell. "Inside Mr. Hopkins, *sir*," Hanson said with mock respect.

Tom looked out through the doorway that led to freedom but he knew he couldn't – and wouldn't – make a break for it and try to run out the doorway to escape. Dispirited, he entered the cell as instructed.

"What about a phone call? Can I call my mother?" Tom asked.

"Later. Right now, I want you to give me your belt and your shoelaces and empty your pockets on the bed there." Just then, another officer came in and entered the cell with them. He carried a large manila envelope and a clipboard. He handed the envelope to Hanson as Tom emptied his pockets onto the bed then sat down to pull off his shoelaces. When Tom finished with the shoelaces, he stood up and took off his belt and added it to the items on the bed. The second officer stood to the side, pen poised at the ready over the clipboard, while Hanson picked up each item, one at a time, from the bed and described each out loud before dropping the item into the envelope. The second officer scribbled a list of the items onto a form attached to the clipboard and when everything, including Tom's shoelaces, was in the envelope Hanson sealed it and handed it to the other officer who wrote Tom's name on the outside of it before handing both the clipboard and the envelope back to Hanson.

"Look over this list, make sure it's correct, then sign at the bottom," Hanson instructed. Tom took clipboard and the proffered pen and did as he was told. After Tom signed the form, Hanson held out the sealed envelope and said, "Now

sign your name under where it's printed to attest to the fact that you saw me put everything that's on the list inside the envelope." Tom took the envelope and, again, did as instructed. "Make yourself comfortable Hopkins, and *please enjoy your stay*," Hanson said sarcastically before snatching the pen and envelope out of Tom's hands and exiting the cell.

The second officer followed Hanson out and locked the cell door behind them and they walked away, headed toward the exit. He heard the door to the outer hallway close heavily behind the two police officers as they left. Tom was both frightened and confused; he didn't understand what was happening. Why had they put him in jail? He hadn't done anything wrong! He was trying to *help* them – he was trying to help Nancy and another girl who was in danger! Why were they locking him up like a criminal?

He looked around, thankful that at least he was alone in here; the other cell was empty. He sat down on the bed, put his face in his hands, and rubbed his eyes. He hoped his mother didn't try to call him tonight. He didn't want her to be worried if she couldn't reach him – not that she called him every night or anything – but he knew she would worry if she did call and couldn't reach him.

Tom was tired. He'd been sitting in that room all afternoon and his back was sore. He stood up and did some stretches to ease the kinks in his back, then he laid down on the cot and stretched out on his back with his shoes still on. He wondered if he was entitled to a phone call – that's how it was on television – could they just keep him locked up in here without letting him call a lawyer or something? He hadn't done anything to *need* a lawyer, but still...

As Tom lay there wondering why he'd been locked in a cell, he heard the door to the outer hallway open and he bolted up into a sitting position. Chief Creighton stepped into view and Tom jumped up and went to the door of the cell.

"Why am I here?" Tom asked. "What have I done? Don't I get a phone call? When can I go home? Am I under

arrest?"

"Whoa! Slow down Mr. Hopkins. Let me explain," Chief Creighton said. Tom grabbed hold of the bars with both hands and looked at Creighton, unable to disguise his fear. "First of all, you are *not* under arrest..."

"Then I want to go home now."

"Well... no. I'm sorry but you'll have to stay – just for a while."

"But why? I haven't done anything. I came here to *help*," Tom said.

"Yes. And you have helped Mr. Hopkins. Detective Young is checking into the information you provided as we speak..."

"Then why can't I go home?" Tom demanded. He was growing frustrated now.

"Well, let's just say we want to keep you *safe*, Mr. Hopkins. Detective Young had some concerns... uh, for your safety, you see. He asked me to keep you under police protection while he investigates a few things. You could be a very valuable witness, Mr. Hopkins. We want to make sure nothing happens to you."

Tom wasn't a stupid man. He didn't know why Chief Creighton wasn't being honest with him, but he could tell the man was trying to placate him. "With all due respect, sir, I haven't done anything wrong and I'd like to go home – *now*," Tom said firmly.

"I'm sorry, Tom – may I call you Tom? I can't let you go home just yet. It'll be best for you if you just cooperate. If you've done nothing wrong, you've got nothing to worry about, right? Just get some rest and be patient," Creighton suggested.

"What about a phone call? I'd like to call my mother so she won't be worried."

"Yes. Of course. I'll send Hanson back in to let you make your call," Creighton promised. He turned away and left Tom standing there holding onto the bars of his cell feeling

like a criminal.

CHAPTER 17

Hey buddy, a voice behind Tom said. Slowly, Tom let go of the bars and turned around. Seeing no one, he whispered, “Who’s there?”

The name’s Pete, the voice replied as Tom’s eyes scanned the cell around him. *What’s the matter with you? You blind or something?* the voice asked.

“Yeah, something like that,” Tom said, irritated with the situation he was in and irritated that he wasn’t alone in the cell after all.

Well nobody around here will talk to me, so I want you to tell Creighton I want a phone call too. Tell them they can’t keep ignoring me like this! I know my rights! They gotta give me a phone call, just like always.

“I think it’s a little late for that,” Tom muttered and turned back to the bars waiting for Hanson to come back and let him call his mother.

What d’ya mean by that? I’m always allowed a phone call when I wake up.

Tom ignored the voice and just stood there waiting.

Hey! Answer me! What did you mean it’s a little late for that? the man’s voice demanded.

Tom turned back around and faced the empty cell and bluntly said, “Pete, I don’t think you’re aware, but you’re dead.”

What the fuck? Smart ass, eh? the voice said angrily. *Dead my ass!*

Tom turned his back on the voice when he heard the outer door open and footsteps approaching. Hanson appeared and pulled out his keys and unlocked the door.

“Come on. Let’s go make that phone call to your mommy, Hopkins.”

Hanson, I get a phone call too, right? Tell this dickhead that I always get a call when I wake up!

“He can’t hear you,” Tom muttered as he stepped out

of the cell and Hanson closed the door behind him.

“What’s that Hopkins?” Hanson asked.

Give me my fucking phone call Hanson! the voice in the cell bellowed.

“Nothing. A dead guy wants his phone call.”

“What the...” Hanson said and turned to look at the recently vacated cell. “Don’t try any of your crazy shit with me, Hopkins,” he warned.

“Whatever,” Tom replied, his patience depleted. “I don’t care if you believe me or not. What do I care if Pete always gets a phone call when he wakes up?”

Hanson stopped, his hand on the knob to the outer hallway door. “What did you say?” He asked slowly and let go of the doorknob.

“I said, what do I care if the guy always gets a phone call when he wakes up – he’s not going to be waking up again any time soon. Pete’s dead and he doesn’t even know it.”

“Holy fuck!” Hanson whispered. His eyes narrowed and he started to get angry. “Are you fucking with me Hopkins?”

“No,” Tom replied with complete seriousness. “Can I go make my phone call please?”

Hanson stared him straight in the face but said nothing. In an instant his expression went from anger to suspicion then doubt to contempt. He pulled the door open and gave Tom a hard shove and pushed him out into the hallway. “Phone’s that way,” he barked and pointed.

* * * *

“Pete, I’m sorry,” Tom said, exasperated. “I can’t help you. They’re not going to be giving you a phone call. You’re *dead*,” he repeated for the tenth time.

And you’re a crazy motherfucker! the voice who’d identified himself as Pete proclaimed.

“Pete. Seriously. You’re dead. That’s why Hanson

doesn’t answer you when he comes in here. Did you ever stop to wonder why nobody else answers you when you talk to them?”

Well... no. I just figured he was pissed because I got black-out drunk again and ended up here AGAIN when I was supposed to be on the wagon, Pete responded. Am I really dead? Hey! Wait a minute! If I’m dead then how come you’re talking to me?

“Because. I can hear dead people, but nobody else around here can – at least nobody that I know of anyway,” Tom explained.

I don’t believe you, Pete said.

“Suit yourself,” Tom said wearily and sat down on the bed. “I’m going to try to get some sleep, so be quiet for a while.” He stretched out and crossed his arm over his eyes, trying to relax so he could get some rest.

* * * *

“See what I mean, Chief?” Hanson said as he and Chief Creighton watched Tom via the surveillance camera. There was a picture, but no sound and Tom appeared to be talking to someone. “Who’s he talking to in there?”

“Probably just talking to himself. You did say he was weird, didn’t you? I’m going home now, and you need to stop hanging around watching Tom Hopkins and go home and get some sleep. I’ll see you in the morning.” Creighton walked away leaving Hanson staring at the black and white screen.

He knew the Hopkins guy had a reputation for being strange, but Hanson was really getting creeped out by the guy. Pretending to talk to people who weren’t there – the guy must be nuts, right? People couldn’t really talk to ghosts. And anybody who claimed they could had to be a charlatan – or a lunatic. Hanson figured he’d better watch his back around Tom Hopkins. If Hopkins killed the Wilcox girl, he was a lot more dangerous than he looked and Hanson was going to make sure he didn’t get away with killing a young girl in his

town. The bastard would fry if Hanson had anything to say about it.

He called to the officer across the room chatting it up with the cleaning crew and waved him over. "We're done here," Hanson told him and the other officer nodded and took a seat at a desk in view of the monitors. It was standard protocol to keep an eye on the monitors 24/7 when there was someone locked up but it didn't happen often in Bright Creek, so they didn't have a designated officer for the job. Whoever was on desk duty had to keep watch over any prisoner that might be locked up – and the last person who'd been locked up in there overnight had been Pete. Hanson had been on duty that night when Pete was brought in *again* for being drunk and disorderly. Hanson had been disgusted with Pete because he was supposed to be on the wagon. They'd dumped Pete in a cell to sleep it off, as they usually did, except that night Pete hadn't slept it off – he'd died.

Hanson walked down the hallway to the locker room and opened his locker. It had been over six months since the night Pete died and Hanson still carried guilt over it. It had been *him* on watch that night and he still felt as though he should've known Pete was in distress; should have been able to save him – even though the autopsy had revealed there was nothing anyone could have done to prevent Pete's death. The years of alcohol abuse had finally caught up with him and he'd quietly passed away sometime during the night as he laid there on the cot sleeping it off. When Hopkins said there was a dead guy named Pete saying he always got a phone call when he woke up, Hanson nearly had a stroke. Pete had always demanded his phone call when he woke up. But how could Hopkins have known that? It suddenly occurred to Hanson that Hopkins was the caretaker at the cemetery and as such, he knew about every death in the community. Certainly, he would have known about Pete's death. *The sick fuck was just yanking my chain*, Hanson thought as he slammed his locker and headed for the door.

* * * *

Tom was starting to go stir crazy locked in the jail cell. Other than the officer who brought him breakfast this morning, he hadn't seen or talked to anyone else – except Pete, who was, quite frankly, driving him up a wall.

But how can you hear me when nobody else can?

"I don't know. I just can. How many times do I have to tell you that, Pete?"

Well I just don't get it. I also don't get why I'm still locked up in this cell if I'm dead.

"Did you ever stop to think that maybe you *aren't* still locked up in this cell? Maybe you can walk right on out of here anytime you want to. Have you tried?"

Uh...no. I haven't tried. I guess it never occurred to me – probably because, until you got here, I didn't even know I was dead!

"Then why don't you try it and see. Walk right through those bars and go home if you want to," Tom said, pointing at the bars of the cell. It was quiet then and Tom couldn't see if Pete was walking through the bars or not, so he just stood there waiting. "Well?"

Hey! You were right! Pete's voice said in awe from the other side of the bars. I'm out! I'm free!

"That's just great," Tom said glumly.

Now what? Pete asked.

"How should I know?" Tom answered. "Go home. Or better yet, do you see a bright light, or a tunnel or anything? Maybe you can cross over? Move on?"

Move on to where exactly? Pete wanted to know.

"I don't know... Heaven? Whatever you believe in, I guess..." Tom never knew where the souls at Oak Lawn went after they left there, he just assumed they crossed over, moved on, went to a better place – something like that. At least he hoped that Rosalie and his father were somewhere better like Heaven.

I don't know what I believe in, Pete said thoughtfully. But I don't see a bright light or a tunnel or anything like that – just the same old jail. He sighed and said, I guess I might as well go home. Thanks, buddy, and good luck!

"Thanks. Good luck to you, too." Tom didn't know if Pete had heard him or not because there was no response. He assumed Pete was gone and he was glad to finally have the cell to himself. He hadn't gotten much sleep during the night because Pete kept waking him up, talking and asking questions. Tom stretched out on the bed to wait for somebody – anybody – to come in so he could ask a few questions of his own.

CHAPTER 18

"Tom Hopkins," the judge said sternly, "You have been found guilty of the murder of Nancy Wilcox." The proclamation elicited loud gasp from the gallery followed by the sounds of a woman crying.

"No! I didn't kill her!" Tom protested and his attorney shushed him as murmuring erupted from the gallery behind him.

"Silence!" the judge ordered and the murmuring stopped. "You have been found guilty by a jury of your peers and I hereby sentence you to life in prison without parole." He banged his gavel then commanded, "Take the prisoner away."

A deputy grabbed Tom by the arm and snapped a pair of handcuffs onto his wrist. "Hands behind your back, Hopkins," he instructed.

"But... but..." Tom stammered wildly as he put his hands behind his back. "I didn't kill anyone! I'm innocent!" He looked out into the gallery and saw his mother who was crying and looking at him. "Mom! I didn't do it! I swear!" Tom called out, but his mother just shook her head sadly as tears rolled down her cheeks.

"Come on," the deputy growled and pushed Tom toward a door in the side of the courtroom. Tom shuffled toward the door, looking down at the shackles around his ankles as if he hadn't realized they were there. He craned his neck and looked around for his mother. The gallery was emptying around her as she stood watching (and crying) as Tom was taken from the room.

The door opened in front of Tom and the deputy pushed him through. He stumbled but before he could fall he was caught by another deputy on the other side who'd opened the door for Tom to come through. Tom's mind was racing. How did this happen? How is it possible that he was being sent to prison for life? He didn't kill Nancy Wilcox! He'd come to the police because Nancy told him her abductor had kidnapped

another girl. He'd only been trying to *help*. But instead, the police had arrested him for killing Nancy!

The two deputies escorted him down a long hallway toward a door marked *EXIT* but before they reached the door, the deputies stopped. One of them opened a door to Tom's right and told him to go inside. After stepping through the doorway, the deputy unlocked one wrist from the handcuffs behind Tom's back and told him to sit, pointing to a chair next to a table. Tom sat and the deputy locked the open handcuff to a big metal ring in the center of the table.

"We'll wait here for the prison transport," the deputy informed Tom. "It'll be a while. Do you want water?" Tom nodded yes and the deputy cocked his head and gave his counterpart a nod. The second deputy left the room and soon came back with a paper cup, then the door closed behind him. He put the cup on the table in front of Tom then he turned and sat down in a chair beside the door. The first deputy sat down at the table opposite Tom and everyone was silent.

Tom took a sip of water then quietly asked, "Will I get to see my lawyer before I go?"

"Dunno."

"Am I allowed to request it? Request to talk to my attorney, I mean?"

As if the question bored him to death, the deputy sighed and pushed his chair back and stood up. "Yeah. I'll go see if he wants to see you." He went to the door and pulled it open. He left the room, the door closing behind him, leaving Tom alone with the second deputy who was sitting by the door.

Several minutes passed as Tom sat waiting. He was terrified of going to prison. He'd heard stories – as most people have – about prison life and he was scared shitless. He glanced around the small, windowless room in which he sat knowing his cell would probably be even smaller and even more claustrophobic. He felt tears welling in his eyes and fought them back, not wanting to cry in front of the deputy. He knew when he got to prison he would have to try not to show any

weakness – but he knew it was hopeless; he was doomed. He was no actor and he knew there was no way his fear wouldn't show. He may as well have a flashing neon sign over his head pointing out that he was scared shitless.

The door opened and Tom's lawyer came in. The deputies left the room and his lawyer sat down at the table and said, "I'm really sorry Tom. I thought putting you on the stand would make people sympathetic to you – I thought they might believe you. But clearly they didn't."

"I can't go to prison!" Tom cried. "Isn't there anything else you can do?"

"We can appeal, but it'll take time. There's nothing I can do to prevent you from going to prison, Tom. I'm sorry."

Tom hung his head and started to cry. His attorney shuffled in his seat and coughed, clearly uncomfortable but Tom didn't care – his lawyer got to go home – but *he* was going to prison! For life! He sobbed until snot ran out of his nose and dripped on the table in front of him. His attorney reached into his briefcase and pulled out a package of tissue which he gave to Tom. Tom took it, pulled one out, and wiped his nose.

"I can get the papers ready for an appeal and file them as soon as possible," his attorney said as Tom cleaned his face and tried to pull himself together. "But like I said, appeals take time. There's no way to predict how long it might take – or whether it'll be successful. But if you give me the go ahead, I'll get things going."

"Yes," Tom said. "Please. I can't stay in prison! I... I didn't kill anybody!"

"I know Tom, I know," his attorney assured him. "I'll get things rolling as soon as I get back to my office, don't you worry. You just try to be strong, okay?" He stood up and walked to the door. Before opening it, he turned back to Tom and said, "I'll do my best to get you out of this, Tom. I promise."

Tom looked up at him but didn't speak and then the man was gone.

Tom? It was Rosalie's voice! *Tom, wake up. Wake up Tom,* she said. Tom woke with a start and found himself lying on the cot in the Bright Creek jail covered in sweat. His heart was beating a mile a minute and it took him a few moments to realize that he'd been dreaming. *Dreaming!* Tom thought with relief. It wasn't too late for him to get out of this!

* * * *

After wrapping up their meeting with the detectives from the other precincts, Art and Michaels sat in the conference room going over their notes. This case was getting uglier and uglier by the minute. All of the detectives agreed that their respective cases were similar, both in victim and MO, and they all agreed they would need to work together and share any leads they came across until they could definitively determine if they were looking for one killer or if the cases were unrelated. Nobody had any leads to speak of, each investigation having stalled before even getting started, and nobody really believed the cases were unrelated.

"What do you think the chances are that these cases aren't related?" Michaels asked.

"I'm thinking those chances aren't very good – you?"

"Yeah, that's what I'm thinking too. The vics, the MOs, way too similar in my mind."

"I agree. The victims also show a sort of progression. Like the guy has been experimenting and each time going a bit further than the last," Art said.

"Yep. And the way the bodies have been cleaned and dumped – not giving us any good forensic evidence – indicates that the guy is smart, knows we won't have much to go on," Michaels added.

"Not to mention the location of each dump. Could be chosen on purpose because they're in different precincts. Might take longer for us to figure out they're related that way," Art surmised.

"Makes sense," Michaels agreed. "But why dump them in the city at all? Why not bury them somewhere out in the country where they might not be found?"

"I don't know," Art said, frustrated. "Maybe we should start with the victims that have been identified. Are they connected in any way? Are they somehow connected to their killer?"

"Sounds like as good a place to start as any. Maybe Smitty has gotten the parents to make a positive ID on our girl by now. I'll go find him and see what's what." Michaels stood and gathered his files and notes and Art followed suit.

"I'll get started looking into possible connections between the vics." Art said as they left the conference room and headed down the hallway.

* * * *

Tom had just finished eating the lunch they'd brought him when a police officer came in to get him. "Chief wants to see you," he told Tom as he unlocked the cell and opened the door.

"When do I get to go home?" Tom asked.

"I don't know. You'll have to ask the chief. This way, please." He opened the door to the hall and waited for Tom to pass through then told him they would be going back to the same interview room Tom had been in the day before. The officer followed Tom as they walked down the hallway and out into the open area filled with desks. Tom stopped when they reached the door to the room he'd waited in for so long yesterday and the officer opened the door and ushered Tom inside.

"Take a seat. The chief will be with you in a few minutes."

Tom did as he was told and the officer left the room, closing the door behind him. Tom got up and tried the door; it was locked. He sat back down and waited. He wished he still

had the notes he'd taken when talking to Nancy, but they'd taken those from him when they made him empty his pockets the night before. Since he couldn't read through his notes, he sat trying to remember everything he'd discussed with Chief Creighton and Detective Young the day before. Was there anything he'd said that would make them think *he* had killed Nancy? Tom didn't think so – he'd merely relayed the information that Nancy had given him – but he wondered if they were somehow trying to make a case against him.

Although he'd never been in trouble with the police before, Tom knew from watching police dramas on television that police could hold a person in jail without arresting them while they tried to make a case against them. He wasn't sure how long he could be held without charges – twenty four hours? Forty eight? – but he didn't believe he was being held for his own protection as Chief Creighton had indicated yesterday. Tom was afraid they hadn't believed he could speak with the dead and they thought he was somehow involved in Nancy's murder.

He should have known better. He should have known they wouldn't believe him. Most people didn't. Most people in this town thought he was weird, maybe even crazy, but did that mean they thought him capable of murder? Why had he been stupid enough to think they would listen to him? Why had he thought they would *believe* him? He'd been a fool to come here. A fool for thinking anyone would believe him when he told them the information had come from a dead girl. Tom sat beating himself up for having been so naive. Of course they thought he killed Nancy!

Stupid! Stupid! Stupid! Tom berated himself. How was he going to get himself out of this mess? Aside from his mother, who else would believe he could actually talk to the dead? And he'd sent the spirit of Pete away, too, so now he couldn't even try to convince them by talking to Pete. Just as Tom convinced himself there was no hope for him, the door opened and Chief Creighton came in followed by Detective

Young. The door was closed behind them and both men sat down opposite Tom.

"Mr. Hopkins," Chief Creighton began, "Detective Young has a few more questions for you."

"I'd like to go home now," Tom said.

"Just a few more questions, Mr. Hopkins," Detective Young told Tom.

"No. No more questions!" Tom said adamantly. "Not unless I have an attorney first."

"Now *Tom*," Creighton placated, "We just need to get a few more details straight before we let you go home, that's all, isn't that right Detective Young?"

"Yes. I'd just like you to clear a few things up for me, if you will?" Detective Young asked. "You've got no reason to worry, Tom."

Tom sighed and agreed, "Okay."

"Great!" Detective Young said, relieved. "Now yesterday you told us that Nancy told you she'd been raped and tortured?"

"Yes."

"And she told you that her abductor tied her wrists with a rope and used various knives to torture her?" Young asked.

"Yes. Three knives she said," Tom answered. The two policemen looked at each other then back at Tom.

"And she was killed by a stab wound?" Young asked.

"No. She said her killer sliced into her leg and she bled to death."

"Then he dumped her body in a ditch?"

"Yes. She told me there was another girl tied up in the back of the van that he used to dump her body. We need to find this guy before he kills that other girl!" Tom said, exasperated with their questions when they should be trying to find the other girl that had been kidnapped.

"Yes. Of course we do." Detective Young said. "Do you have any idea who this other girl is, Tom? Do you know

where she is?"

"No. Nancy didn't tell me that. She just told me about the van. Are you looking for the van? Has another girl been reported missing?"

"We're really not at liberty to discuss the investigation, Tom," Young replied. "We're just trying to get our facts straight about what *you say* Nancy told you."

"What *I say* Nancy told me? She *did* tell me. I told you I can speak to the dead. Don't you believe me?"

"Well you have to admit it's a little hard to believe that someone can talk to the dead," Chief Creighton interjected.

"Yes... but... but... I can!" Tom insisted.

"Of course you can Tom," Creighton soothed. "Let's not get all upset now."

"How can I NOT get upset?" Tom cried. "You don't believe me and you're holding me here even though I've asked – repeatedly – to leave! Are you trying to pin Nancy's murder on *me*? Is that why I'm still here?"

As Creighton opened his mouth to speak, Young beat him to it. "You'll have to excuse us for a moment, Mr. Hopkins. Chief, if we could just step outside?" Creighton nodded and the two men got up and left the room. Tom sat helplessly looking after them, determined to demand a lawyer when they came back in.

"I think we've got enough to arrest him on suspicion," Detective Young said after they were out of Tom's hearing.

"But he doesn't have a record. He's never been in trouble before. I'm not so sure he's capable of committing a crime like this," Creighton expressed with doubt.

"That may be so – and I'm not saying he's for sure our killer – but he could be involved. He knows details of Nancy Wilcox's murder that haven't been released. How would he know all those things if he wasn't involved?" Young queried.

"I don't know. Maybe he really can talk to the dead?" Creighton asked and Young gave him a skeptical look. "Well it is possible. There are people who can, you know," Creighton

said defensively.

"Yeah, but what are the chances that this guy is one of them? Besides, we've got no other suspects. I say you arrest him so we can keep him locked up while we investigate further."

"I'm not so sure I want to do that – not just yet. We've still got a bit of time before we have to let him go. How about I just continue to hold him until our time runs out and we make a decision then?" Creighton asked.

Young let out an exasperated sigh but finally agreed, "Okay. We'll do it your way – for now. But when our time runs out, we're going to have to arrest him."

* * * *

Creighton was conflicted. He knew what Detective Young said made sense, but he was having a hard time imagining Tom Hopkins being the one who'd done all those things to Nancy Wilcox. Until now, he'd always liked being the Chief of Police in Bright Creek. It was a relatively small town with small town crime. There had only been one murder in Bright Creek in the past seventy-five years and that was brought on by a dispute between two local men over a woman. Creighton hadn't even been born yet when the lover of a married Bright Creek woman shot the woman's husband in a jealous fit of rage.

When Creighton first came to Bright Creek to take over the position of police chief, his incumbent had told him that life in Bright Creek was quiet – and it had been quiet for Creighton – until now. And now a man sat waiting for his life to be taken away from him and Creighton had doubts that the man was guilty of anything. Was it possible that Tom Hopkins could actually communicate with the dead? As Creighton stood mulling over what he was going to say to Hopkins, Hanson came sauntering up.

"Hey Chief, I see Hopkins isn't in his cell. Did we cut

him loose?"

"No," Creighton said wearily, "He's in there." He jerked his thumb over his shoulder toward the interview room.

"What's going on? Did you arrest him?" Hanson wanted to know.

"No. He's still being held without charge – but Detective Young was just here and he's convinced Hopkins is involved in Nancy Wilcox's death."

"That so?" Hanson said. "You think he is?"

"I don't know. But I have to hold him anyway. What's your feeling on it, Hanson?"

Hanson considered it for a moment then said, "Well, I grew up in this town as you know, and Hopkins has always had a reputation around here – ever since we were in school – people have always said he was weird, but is he a killer? Hard to say. But he gives me the creeps, that's for sure. Yesterday he told me he was talking to Pete back in the cells."

"He said he was talking to Pete?" Creighton asked, suddenly very interested. "Do you think that's possible? I mean, that he can talk to spirits or whatever?"

"I doubt it. More likely he's just a bit touched in the head after working in a cemetery for so long. You know he's worked there since he was a kid, right?"

"No. I didn't know that. But I guess that's one theory..." he trailed off, thinking. "Anyway, you're on patrol today so go be a presence in the community while I take Hopkins back to his cell."

"Okay Chief, unless you want me to take him back before I go?" Hanson volunteered.

"No. I think I'll do it myself."

"Whatever you say, boss."

* * * *

"Tom," Creighton said as he closed the cell door and locked it. "I want you to know that I appreciate your

understanding about staying here a while longer. I know this can't be easy for you, but I'm hoping we can clear everything up and let you go home soon."

"I appreciate you explaining the situation to me, Chief Creighton. I'd rather stay somewhat voluntarily instead of being arrested, and since you let me talk to my mother and contact an attorney, I think staying here is the best thing for now. I haven't done anything wrong. I'm trying to help."

"Yes. I know you are," Creighton said. "About this whole talking to the dead thing, though, I've just never met anyone who could do that, you know?"

"Neither had I – before it happened to me, I mean," Tom responded.

"And you say it happened to you after your accident? After you were in a coma?"

"Yes."

"And how did you figure it out? I mean, when – and how – did you start communicating with spirits?" Creighton asked as he pulled a chair from the desk around the corner and sat down.

"Well, at first I thought I was imagining things," Tom began. "I thought I was hearing things, you know? And it was only in the cemetery – at first anyway – so I thought maybe it was just my grief over losing my wife. Like maybe I was... I don't know... maybe I was feeling guilty that I survived the accident and she didn't or something, and it was driving me crazy. But then I got frustrated with the voices and I shouted out for them to shut up and leave me alone. It was then that the spirits realized I could hear them, and they started addressing me, telling me who they were, asking me to pass on messages, and I began to match the names they gave me with the tombstones in the cemetery. I started having *conversations* with them and then doing as they asked and passing on their messages to people who came to mourn them. And when the souls began to 'move on' from the cemetery after I passed on their messages, well, I felt I was *helping them* to be able to cross

over to Heaven – or to go wherever they go next. I just knew that many of them were no longer there. I mean, I no longer heard them after passing on their messages and the others that were still there, they told me the souls were crossing over after I helped them,” Tom explained.

“I see. It’s all very interesting, Tom, but I’m sure you understand my skepticism. It’s just so hard to believe,” Creighton admitted.

“Yeah, I know. My parents thought I was crazy at first, too. They sent me for all these examinations... But then I was able to give my mother a message from her sister – a sister I hadn’t even known had existed, and I didn’t know was buried in the cemetery – and then my mom believed me and convinced my dad that I was telling the truth about speaking with the dead. After that, I didn’t feel so crazy anymore. My mom, among other people who have come back to thank me after-the-fact for the messages I gave them, validated that I wasn’t crazy; that I actually was communicating with the dead.”

“I’d really like to believe you too, if there was just some way for you to prove it to me...” Creighton said. “But even if I believed you, I don’t know that I would be able to convince Detective Young.” He was silent for a moment before asking, “You said that you’d thought you could only hear the spirits in the cemetery at first, what did you mean by that?”

“Well, at first I only heard the voices when I was in the cemetery,” Tom said. “I spend so much time there, you see, and it never occurred to me that I might be able to communicate with the dead anyplace but in the cemetery. I thought it was *because* I was in the cemetery, you know? But then, when my dad died – it happened in my parents’ kitchen – he spoke to me. He’d just suddenly died moments before. Even then, it didn’t really register with me. It wasn’t until we got to the hospital later that night, and then a few days later at the funeral home, that I realized the extend of it. I heard so many spirits in the hospital, and again at the funeral home, that I knew it wasn’t just something that happened in the cemetery.

I can hear them anywhere.”

“I see. And have you encountered any spirits here? In the police station or here in the cells?” Creighton asked, thinking of what Hanson had told him earlier.

Tom was heartened by the question until he remembered that he’d sent Pete away. “Yes,” he told Creighton. “There was a guy named Pete here in the cell with me last night, but he’s gone now.”

“Gone? Gone where?” Creighton asked.

“I’m not sure. He didn’t realize he was dead. He thought everyone was ignoring him because he’d been hauled in for drinking again. After I convinced him that he was dead and nobody else could hear him, I told him he should try to cross over or something, but he said he didn’t know how – said he couldn’t even get out of the cell. But I told him that maybe he could get out of the cell, seeing as how he was a ghost and all, so he tried it and then told me I was right. He was outside of the cell. Then he told me he was going home. I haven’t heard from him since.”

“I see,” Creighton said, somewhat disappointed. He’d thought to try to test Tom’s abilities by having him communicate with Pete, but since Tom now claimed that Pete wasn’t there anymore, his doubts came back to the surface. Anyone could have read about Pete’s death in the holding cell, so Tom’s claims proved nothing. Creighton stood and thanked Tom for speaking so candidly with him and after putting the chair back where he’d found it, he left Tom and went back to his office.

* * * *

After Creighton left him, Tom paced back and forth in his cell wishing he hadn’t sent Pete away. He might have been able to convince Chief Creighton that he was telling the truth, but now he felt as though Creighton was more doubtful of him than he’d been before. If he could have convinced Creighton

he was telling the truth, at least he might have had one person on his side. But now he'd never know because he'd sent Pete away.

Tomorrow, Tom's mother would be meeting with the attorney Tom had spoken to and she would give him a retainer fee, then the attorney would come to the jail and meet with Tom in person. He hoped he wouldn't end up needing an attorney, but Tom knew he was in a precarious situation and it would be better to be prepared in case he was arrested when the time police could hold him without charging him ran out. He was grateful to Chief Creighton for explaining things to him about what Creighton believed would happen next. Even though he hadn't been able to convince Creighton that he really could communicate with the dead, Creighton still seemed to doubt Tom's involvement in Nancy's murder, and that was a plus in Tom's eyes.

Lost in his thoughts Tom didn't know how long he'd been pacing; he was surprised when an officer came in bringing his dinner. He thanked the officer and sat down on his cot to eat. It appeared they were getting his meals from Polly's and Tom was glad he was at least getting good food while he was here. He imagined prison food would be nothing like food from Polly's. The thought of eating prison food – of being in prison – filled Tom with anxiety and he made a conscious effort to push it away so he could eat.

No sooner had he finished eating when the same officer came back in and took away the remnants of Tom's dinner. Tom looked up at the security camera and figured they must be keeping a pretty close eye on him. He supposed a guilty man might be as desperate as to try to hang himself with his shoelaces, but Tom wasn't a guilty man and he would give them no trouble while he was here. He just needed to have faith that he would be released soon. If only Nancy were here with him to speak *through* him to the police and answer their questions. But Tom had no way of knowing if Nancy was still in this world or if she'd already moved on to the next. He

sighed and stretched out on the cot thinking, staring at the ceiling, and waiting.

* * * *

It was after ten when Art finally left the station that night. Their dead girl had been positively identified by her parents as being Heidi Beauchamp, seventeen years old. Art had been relieved he hadn't been the one there when the parents came in to identify their daughter. It was always like getting kicked in the gut watching people go through that. It always made Art think about his own family and how terrible it would be if it were one of his siblings coming in to identify one of Art's nieces or nephews. He hated that part of the job. Smitty told him later that the mother was hysterical afterward, but by the time Art had interviewed the parents, she'd been firmly under control and able to answer all of his questions.

He and Michaels had spent the last few hours trying to find a link between their victim and the dead girls from the other precincts – one of which had yet to be identified – but they hadn't had any luck finding a connection yet. From what information they had on each girl so far, the girls didn't seem to be connected in any way and Art was afraid that angle was going to be a dead end. If the perp was abducting girls at random, it would make it that much harder to catch him. Without some kind of link, they didn't have much else at this point to go on.

Tomorrow they might have what they needed to check out the dead girls' social media accounts. Until then, they were looking for any kind of connections the girls might have had through schools, jobs, close friends or family, and any other thing they could think of that might link any or all of the girls in some way. It was a bit more complicated getting the green light to access social media accounts and other internet activity. Heidi Beauchamp's parents had handed her cell phone and computer over to police after Heidi first went missing and Art

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was waiting on the information obtained in that investigation to see if anything might be relevant to this investigation, but again, he wouldn't get his hands on that until tomorrow. He and Michaels had gone through what cell phone and computer records had been retrieved in the other victims' cases that they'd gotten from their meeting with the other detectives, but so far they'd found no links there either. Plus there was the other as-yet unidentified girl and until they knew who she was, they wouldn't be able to investigate possible links between her and the other dead girls.

It was slow going and Art felt like the clock was ticking. There could be another girl out there being tortured right now and he was helpless to do anything about it. He dreaded finding out another body had been found – but he felt in his gut that it would happen; it was just a matter of when. Art decided to stop off at Duffy's for a drink before going home. He was too keyed up to be able to sleep any time soon and a drink might help relax him. It probably wouldn't take his mind off the case, but at least it would allow him to decompress a bit. If he was lucky, maybe there'd be somebody worth talking to at Duffy's tonight.

Tom's mother went to meet with the attorney first thing in the morning and afterward, the attorney came straight to the police station to meet with Tom. They sat together now in Tom's cell. The man looked nothing like the attorney in Tom's dream and Tom was somehow relieved. He knew it was silly to think that way, but he couldn't help it. The dream had really brought the seriousness of the situation to the front of Tom's mind. Fortunately he'd had no dreams (that he remembered) his second night in jail.

"Legally, they can hold you up to forty eight hours without charging you," the attorney told Tom. "And you've been here how long so far?" he asked.

"Well..." Tom calculated in his mind then responded, "I've been here almost that long now, I mean, since I first came to the police station to talk to them – but they didn't bring me back to the cell until after dark the other night, so it would have been much later that they technically began holding me."

"I see. Then basically you have about..." he looked at his watch, "...let's say ten to twelve hours until the forty eight is up. I'll check with Chief Creighton for the exact time, but we can estimate for now. Once the forty eight is up, they either have to charge you or let you go. In the meantime, you just sit tight."

"Okay," Tom said. "But don't you want to hear my side of the story?"

"No. At least not right now. There's no sense in you paying me to hear your story if you're not even going to be charged with anything. *If* they charge you with something, then we'll have a thorough discuss about everything. For now, we'll just wait and see."

"Alright. That makes sense. Thank you."

"Just doing what I was hired to do, Mr. Hopkins. I'll go find out exactly what time you were formally detained and I'll come back before the forty eight hours is up – that way I'll

be here if the police charge you. If you're released, well, my work here will be done and I'll return the unused portion of your retainer fee. Sound good?"

"Yes. That sounds good. I appreciate you coming to see me so quickly." The two men stood and shook hands and moments later a policeman came in and unlocked the cell to let the attorney leave. After removing the chair that had been brought in for Tom's attorney, the police officer locked the cell and led the attorney out, leaving Tom alone once again.

* * * *

"We're getting nowhere!" Michaels complained. "I can't find any links between the known victims – nothing!"

"Let's compare what we've checked so far," Art suggested. "Maybe there's something we've missed, or a way they might be linked that we haven't thought of yet."

"Alright," Michaels sighed. "But first I'm going to get some coffee and see if I can scrounge up a donut or something. You want anything?"

Art picked up his coffee mug and took a sip; it was cold. "I'll come with you," he said and got up. "I could use a break."

The two men went off in search of coffee and donuts. By the time they got back to their desks, Art thought Michaels was feeling a bit better. He'd found a donut left over from this morning and had eaten it in three bites. A good dose of sugar always improved Michaels' mood but Art was almost sorry he'd found a donut because that meant they hadn't needed to leave the building and Art was needing a break from the scenery in this place. It was hard not to be frustrated when it seemed like all they were doing was spinning their wheels and going nowhere with this case.

Art set his fresh cup of coffee down on his desk and decided to take a piss before he got back to work. As Michaels sank back into his chair, Art headed for the john. It wasn't so

much the urge to pee that sent Art down the hall, but an urge to walk around a bit more before chaining himself to his desk again. After taking a piss, Art washed his hands and left the men's room and walked around a bit. Maybe a bit of exercise would help his thinking. As he was walking down the corridor, he passed a couple of secretaries and he caught a bit of their conversation and the phrase *to the doctor* jumped out at him and gave him new inspiration. He turned around and made a beeline back to his desk.

"Michaels, have you checked doctors and dentists? Maybe there might be a link between the victims that way?" Art asked before even sitting down.

"No. Hadn't thought of that angle – yet," Michaels qualified.

"Okay, I'll look into it. But first, let's go over what we *have* checked into and see if we can think of any other ideas."

After comparing notes, Art started calling the known victims' families to get information on doctors, dentists, and any hospital visits or the like while Michaels continued scanning the girls' social media accounts, making note of anything that might give them a lead. So far, they'd found no links between any of the victims and their frustration was growing by leaps and bounds.

How the fuck are we supposed to get this guy off the streets if we don't have any useful evidence and we can't find a connection between his victims? Art wondered as he dialed the next number on his list. They really were running out of avenues to follow. If they didn't come up with something soon, he didn't know how they'd ever crack this case – and he hoped there wouldn't be more victims piling up before they got some kind of substantial lead.

* * * *

After his attorney left, Tom started pacing his cell again. He wasn't used to sitting still for such long periods and

two days of inactivity was making him stir crazy; he always had something to keep him busy at the cemetery. He wondered if he'd still have a job when he got out of this mess. He hadn't finished cleaning up after Nancy's burial service and the digging crew were most likely annoyed with him not clearing the way for them to fill in the hole and for leaving them to do it. It was *his* job to take away the chairs and the canopy and to remove the tarp from the mound of dirt and Tom was sure the digging crew would be pissed about the grave not having been prepped for them to fill in. The chairs and the canopy were most likely still outside, exposed to the elements. Tom hoped it wouldn't rain before he could get back and properly store them away.

The cemetery was owned and maintained by the municipality of Bright Creek. Tom was employed by the municipality and he thought the City Council had probably heard by now that he was being held in jail. He was concerned his job might be in jeopardy if he didn't get released today. He was also concerned he *wouldn't* be released today – and that would mean they would arrest him. If he was arrested, he would surely lose his job. Why had he ever come here? He knew before coming here that the police might not believe him. Why had he thought he could help when he knew half the people in this town thought he was crazy?

Tom mentally berated himself and before he realized it, he was talking out loud. "Stupid! Stupid! Stupid! What were you thinking, Tom?" he ranted. Frustrated with himself, he flopped down on the cot and sat staring at the floor, his chin in his hand. It was getting more and more difficult to envision a good outcome for himself. Feeling like no one believed him – or *in* him – was making Tom miss Rosalie. Rosalie had always believed in him; Rosalie had always known what to say to make him feel better. He wondered what she might say to him if she were here now. He wished she were here now – even if she was an unseen spirit. Tom needed Rosalie's unwavering confidence in him. If not for his mother, he would have no

support whatsoever.

As he sat thinking about Rosalie, he heard the door to the outer hallway open and he looked up to see his mother there. When she saw Tom behind bars she burst into tears.

"Mom, don't cry. I'm okay," Tom soothed.

"I... I just can't help it!" his mother sobbed. "I can't believe they've put you in jail!"

"It'll be okay, mom. I haven't done anything wrong. I'm sure it'll all be cleared up soon. Please stop crying."

The police had confiscated her purse before letting her in to see Tom, so Mrs. Connor was forced to resort to wiping her nose on the sleeve of her blouse. After pulling herself together a bit, she said to Tom, "I'm sorry, Tom. Are you really okay?"

"Yes, mom. I'm okay. I can't wait to get out of here though."

"I can't believe the nerve of Chief Creighton putting you in jail!" his mother fumed. "You were only trying to help them, the stupid fools!"

"I feel like the stupid fool," Tom said dejectedly. "I should've known they wouldn't believe me."

"Well I believe you, Tom, and I'll do whatever I have to do to get you out of this place!" she vowed. "Did the attorney come to see you this morning?"

"Yes. He did. Thanks for going to see him mom."

"Of course! Tell me what he had to say."

Tom told her everything that he and the attorney had discussed and when he was finished, his mother nodded with satisfaction and moved on to her next question. "Are they feeding you okay in this place?" she asked, making Tom chuckle because it was such a mom question to ask.

"Yes, mom, they're feeding me well. They've actually been bringing my meals from Polly's," he told her.

"Well at least they're doing something right around here," she grumbled. "Chief Creighton is going to be hearing from me, I'll tell you that much. Locking you up like some kind

of criminal!"

Before Tom could respond, the door opened again and an officer came in and told Mrs. Connor her time was up. She gave a little *humpf* of irritation before putting her hand out to Tom between the bars. Tom took her hand, thanked her for visiting, told her not to worry, and leaned in close to the bars so she could plant a kiss on his cheek. He let go of her hand and watched her walk away as all the while she complained to the police officer about the nerve of Chief Creighton for putting her son in jail. Tom shook his head at her feistiness and a small laugh escaped him.

After his mother left, Tom began to pace again. There was no clock for him to watch, so instead, he watched the sky through the small window set high in the wall of his cell. When he grew bored with pacing, he lay down on the bed and stared up at the window thinking, and trying not to fear the worst. As daylight stretched out and then began to fade, he grew more and more anxious. Would they let him out when the forty eight hours was up? He hadn't done anything wrong, surely they wouldn't be able to arrest him – would they? If only there was some way for him to prove to them he was telling the truth! But how? If only he hadn't sent Pete away! Again, Tom berated himself. He may have been able to convince Chief Creighton that his gift (curse) was for real if Pete had still been here.

As he watched the sky slowly turn from blue to black, Tom reflected on everything he'd told the police since coming here. Was there anything he'd said that would make them think he was the one who killed Nancy? He'd merely told them the things Nancy had told him – what had he said that would make them think he could be guilty of doing something so heinous? Tom started to pace again, growing more and more filled with trepidation as the minutes ticked by. He knew the end of the forty-eight hour holding period was almost upon him. He feared he would be arrested and there was nothing he could do about it. He wished he'd never come here.

* * * *

Chief Creighton walked toward the door to the interview room where he knew Tom Hopkins and his attorney sat waiting. He had serious doubts about what he was about to do, but his hands were tied. He'd received the call from Young an hour ago, but had waited until the forty-eight hour holding period had come to an end in the hopes that Young might call back and tell him the status of the situation had changed. He'd waited in vain because Young hadn't called back, and now *he* was the one who would have to put Tom under arrest. He didn't want to do it – didn't believe Hopkins was guilty of anything – but he had no choice. He couldn't very well argue his gut feeling to Young and expect Young to trust it.

He stopped just outside the door and paused to take a deep breath before reaching for the handle and opening the door. Creighton stepped inside and closed the door behind him. "Gentlemen," he said as he crossed the room and took a seat opposite Tom and his attorney.

"Are you letting me go?" Tom blurted before he could say more.

Creighton cleared his throat and replied, "I'm sorry, Tom, but no. I can't let you go. I have to arrest you."

"What? But why? You can't! I haven't done anything!" Tom protested.

"I'm inclined to believe that," Creighton said. "But unfortunately, it's not up to me. I have instructions from Detective Young to arrest you and hold you until tomorrow morning when he'll come to transport you to the jail in Smith Falls."

"But..." Tom began, but his attorney interrupted.

"On what charge, Chief Creighton?"

"Mr. Hopkins is being charged with the murder of Nancy Wilcox."

* * * *

Tom felt like he'd been kicked in the stomach. He and his attorney still sat in the interview room long after Chief Creighton had officially arrested him and he was telling his attorney everything he could recall telling the police since he'd first arrived at the police station more than two days ago. He felt like he wanted to throw up and it was taking a lot of effort to keep talking. He couldn't believe he'd been arrested! And in the morning he was being transferred to Smith Falls. Smith Falls was much larger than Bright Creek. Tom knew the chances of him having a cell to himself there were not very good and he was afraid of what might happen to him there. He couldn't even bring himself to think about what might happen if he was convicted of killing Nancy because that would mean he would be sent to *prison*. How would he survive prison?

He continued to talk as these thoughts swirled around in the back of his mind. His stomach was churning; fear was like a snake wrapped around his bowels that was slowly squeezing and he felt as if he were outside of himself, watching himself as if he were in a movie. By the time his attorney left – after promising Tom he would do everything he could to try to get him released on bail at his arraignment hearing – Tom felt numb. When he suddenly found himself sitting in his cell, he couldn't even remember being escorted back there again.

It was late now, although Tom had no way of knowing how late, and he sat on the cot in his cell staring but seeing nothing. His mind had finally stilled and it was as if he were asleep, but his eyes were wide open. He didn't even try to lie down, he just sat there bleary eyed and unmoving. He was brought out of his stupor when he heard the door to the outer hallway slam shut – he'd been oblivious to the sound of it opening – and seconds later Officer Hanson appeared in front of his cell.

"Time to go, Hopkins," he announced and Tom slowly stood up. Hanson opened the cell and came inside. Tom hadn't slept a wink all night and it showed on his face. "Long night,

eh Hopkins?" Hanson asked as he escorted Tom from the cell.

They walked out into the hallway then down to the restroom where Tom was allowed to wash up and use the facilities while Hanson waited outside. After he'd splashed water onto his face, and done his best to revive himself after his sleepless night, Tom pulled paper towel from the dispenser and wiped his face and hands. He looked at himself in the mirror and wondered if the cells in Smith Falls had exposed toilets sitting in the middle of them like he'd seen on TV. He hoped not. He turned away from the mirror and left the men's room to find Hanson standing just outside the door.

"Turn around please," Hanson said as he pulled a pair of handcuffs from his belt.

"Are those really necessary?" Tom asked wearily.

"Sorry. Protocol."

Tom did as he was told and turned around, putting his hands behind his back, and Hanson snapped the cuffs on him. As he turned back around, he saw Chief Creighton heading their way and a tiny flicker of hope sparked inside him – maybe he wasn't being transferred. Maybe Creighton would come over here and tell him it had all been a big mistake. But when Creighton reached them, he didn't tell Tom it had been a mistake.

"Tom," Chief Creighton nodded at Tom and Tom just stared at him without speaking. "Here's the paperwork," he told Hanson as he handed him a file and the manila envelope containing Tom's personal effects. Hanson took them and Creighton told him, "Detective Young is waiting outside."

"Got it, Chief," Hanson responded and turned to Tom. "That way, please, Mr. Hopkins," he said with formality and indicated that Tom should head for the door marked *EXIT*.

Tom looked to where Hanson had pointed, then turned back to look at Chief Creighton quietly saying, "I didn't kill Nancy."

"I'm sorry, Tom. There's nothing I can do," Creighton

said.

“Come on,” Hanson said and took Tom by the elbow.

Tom turned away from Creighton and slowly walked toward the exit door. When they reached it, Hanson pushed it open and held it while Tom went through. They were in another hallway with a big door leading to the outside at the other end of it. Just before they reached the door that would take them outside, Tom heard Pete’s voice ask, *Hey, Where they taking you?*

Tom stopped walking and looked around. Irritated, Hanson said, “What the...? Keep walking Hopkins!” he ordered.

“Wait!” Tom said. “Pete? Is that you?”

Yeah. Where you going?

“Cut the crap Hopkins! Keep walking.” Hanson barked and gave him a shove to get him moving.

“Wait! I need to talk to Chief Creighton! We need to go back!” Tom pleaded.

“The chief ain’t got time for your crazy bullshit. Get moving!” Hanson growled.

“But Pete... Pete’s back! We need to tell Creighton!”

“We ain’t telling the chief nothing. Now quit stalling and move!” He gave Tom another shove and reluctantly, Tom started moving again.

“You don’t believe me,” Tom stated flatly.

Hanson. Hey Hanson! Give the poor guy a break, will ya?

“He can’t hear you Pete, remember?” Tom said glumly. “He doesn’t even believe that you’re here. Nobody does.”

“Shut up Hopkins, I’m not falling for it.”

When they reached the door and Hanson pushed it open, bright sunlight blinded Tom and he ducked his head and squinted as he stepped outside. As his eyes began to adjust, Tom saw Detective Young and a uniformed Smith Falls police officer standing next to a Smith Falls police car. He and Hanson continued walking until they reached the car and Hanson began talking to Young as he handed him the file and

the big envelope he carried. Their words were lost to Tom because Pete was going on and on in Tom’s ear. Tom just stood there, listening to what Pete was saying, but not acknowledging his words. He was afraid Detective Young would think him crazy if he responded to Pete in any way – and that was something he needed desperately to convince Young that he was *not*.

After their brief conversation, Young opened the back door of the police car and stepped out of the way while Hanson led Tom to the door and helped him inside. Just before Tom ducked into the car, he said to Hanson, “Pete says to tell you thank you for paying for his son to go to summer camp,” then he slid into the back seat and Hanson slammed the door behind him.

Tom could see the look of confusion on the man’s face as Hanson stood there watching the car as it backed out and drove away.

* * * *

“How the fuck did he know that?” Hanson said out loud as he came back into the building. *I told him*, Pete said – but of course, Hanson couldn’t hear him. He followed Hanson as he walked down the long hallway. Hanson was trying to figure out how Hopkins had known about him paying for Pete’s kid to go to summer camp and he was muttering to himself as he went inside and sat down behind his desk to fill out his report of the prisoner exchange.

I always knew you were a decent sort, Hanson, even though you always acted like a dumb prick, Pete said into Hanson’s ear even though he knew Hanson couldn’t hear him. *Why don’t you find some of that decency to help out that poor guy they just hauled off to Smith Falls? He’s not crazy, he’s the only one around here that can hear me. And now you assholes have handed him over for a murder he didn’t commit*, Pete told him. Hanson stopped typing and brushed at his ear as if there was a fly bothering him, then he went back

to his report. Encouraged, Pete decided to hang around and keep talking into Hanson's ear. Even if Hanson couldn't hear him, who knew, he might still be able to plant an idea or two into Hanson's head.

CHAPTER 20

Tom had been right, the jail in Smith Falls was much bigger than the one in Bright Creek. He'd been put into a cell twice the size of the one he'd been in before and there were three other men already in it. There were four bunks on either side of the large space and, as he'd suspected, along the wall in the back was a toilet and a sink. To Tom's horror and humiliation, he'd been strip-searched. He'd been given a pair of gray sweat pants and a matching sweatshirt with the words *Smith Falls Jail* emblazoned on them in bright orange letters. They'd made him change into the sweats and taken his clothes and he now stood awkwardly just inside his cell as the door rumbled closed behind him.

The other occupants of the cell barely paid him any attention as he stood there frozen in place. One of them finally looked up at him and gave him the once-over, making Tom a bit nervous, so he moved toward an empty bunk and sat down. The upper bunk was much too low to accommodate Tom's 6'3" frame, so he was forced to lean forward and sit hunched up with his back bowed. One of the other prisoners was sprawled out on a top bunk asleep and lightly snoring; another was on the floor doing sit-ups; the third, who had given Tom the once-over, stood up and went to the toilet and starting taking a piss. Tom looked away and turned to face the cell door, uncomfortable and embarrassed to see the other man standing there peeing and worried about when the time came that he would have to pee too.

The peeing man finished his business then turned around and stood staring at Tom as Tom looked away. He chuckled and said, "First time in, eh?"

Startled, Tom turned back toward the man wondering if he should admit that he'd never been in jail before. Before he could say anything, the other man spoke again.

"Yeah, that's what I thought." He turned and went back to his bunk, which was on the wall opposite Tom's, and

laid down on his side, watching Tom and making Tom feel even more uncomfortable.

The man doing sit-ups stopped what he was doing and got up off the floor, brushing his hands off on his pants. He turned and looked at Tom, then turned to the man who lay watching him and said, "Leave him alone Krantz, can't you see he's shitting himself over there?"

He turned to Tom and said, "My name's Zimmerman, but people call me Zim. That's Krantz," he said indicating the guy on the bed, "And sleeping beauty over there is Miller. Don't let Krantz bother ya, he's an asshole."

"Shut your hole Zim," Krantz warned.

Zimmerman gave Krantz a dismissive look before turning back to Tom and asking, "What's your name?"

"Uh... Hopkins. Tom Hopkins."

"Well Hopkins, welcome to the Ritz," Zim said and gave a small wave of the arm indicating the cell. "What are you in for?"

Tom hesitated, not knowing what he should say – should he tell them he'd been arrested for murder? Before he could decide, Zim spoke again.

"Miller over there is in for armed robbery," he said as he threw a thumb over his shoulder toward the man sleeping on the other side of the room. "I'm in for drug offenses – mind, I don't take 'em myself. That shit'll kill ya. And Krantz assaulted his old lady, *again*," Zim supplied.

"Shut it, Zim. I mean it." Krantz interjected menacingly.

"Don't worry about him, he only likes to beat up on *women*," Zim said in response to Krantz. "Too much of a pussy to pick on someone his own size," he taunted.

"Fuck you, asshole!" Krantz said as he jumped to his feet.

"Yeah? Come on, tough guy," Zim invited as he stepped in front of Krantz and the two men stood toe-to-toe and eye-to-eye. Krantz backed down and went back to his

bunk. "Yeah, that's what I thought," Zim said smugly before turning back to Tom. "So what did they haul you in for, Hopkins?"

"Murder," Tom replied without emotion.

Zim's face registered surprise before he gave Tom a smirk and said, "I never woulda guessed that one!" He turned to Krantz and said, "Let that be a lesson to ya, Krantz. You never know who you're messing with *when it's not your wife*," then under his breath as he turned away from Krantz he added, "you fucking piece of shit."

Zim went down onto the floor and started doing pushups then and Krantz rolled over onto his back and didn't say anything more. Tom sat hunched on his bunk and put his elbows on his knees to prop up his head. He could see Zim out of the corner of his eye as he sat staring at the floor of the cell wishing he was anywhere but here and fearing how much worse it was going to get for him. He needed to figure out a way to convince Detective Young that he'd been telling the truth.

* * * *

Chief Creighton looked up as someone came into his office; it was Hanson. "Hanson," Creighton said. "Is that the Hopkins report?"

"Yes, sir." Hanson handed the report to his superior then stood there, unsure of whether he should tell the Chief what he was thinking or not.

"Well? Is there something else?"

Hanson shook his head and responded, "No, I guess not," then he turned to go. He walked back to his desk and sat down. He couldn't understand why it was bothering him so much. Was it possible that Hopkins had been telling the truth about being able to talk to dead people? *Nah*, Hanson thought; there must be some other reasonable explanation. Hopkins couldn't possibly be able to talk to ghosts, could he? He sat

staring out into space, trying to come up with some other explanation for how Hopkins knew he'd paid for Pete's kid to go to camp, but he hadn't told anyone (except for Pete's wife) that he'd done it – so maybe Hopkins knows Pete's wife?

Hanson picked up the telephone; he decided to call Pete's wife and ask her. He dialed Pete's number and waited for her to pick up. *Atta boy!* Pete said into Hanson's free ear. *She'll tell you she doesn't know Hopkins and that she hasn't told anyone about you paying for our son to go to summer camp – because you asked her not to!* Pete listened as Hanson had the expected conversation with his wife and when Hanson hung up, he said, *Go on, buddy. Go tell the Chief. Tell him you're beginning to think maybe Hopkins really can talk to me!*

Hanson sat there, his hand still on the receiver now back in its cradle, and thought of the ramifications if Hopkins had been telling the truth – Detective Young could be wasting valuable time not following up on any leads Hopkins might have given him. Hanson wasn't privy to what Hopkins had told Chief Creighton or Detective Young, but he knew Hopkins had provided information that hadn't been made public. Surely, whatever he'd said could be helpful to the investigation? Maybe Detective Young wasn't looking into what Hopkins had said because he was too busy trying to pin the murder on Hopkins himself. While Hanson couldn't fathom how someone could actually be able to communicate with ghosts, there were several famous mediums on television and lots of people believed *they* could do it. Coming to a decision, Hanson got up and went back to Creighton's office.

* * * *

Michaels drove while Art rode shotgun. It was raining outside and the thumping of the windshield wipers was becoming hypnotic. They were on their way to court to testify at trial in an armed robbery case they'd investigated and neither of them was looking forward to spending the afternoon at the

courthouse when they had so many other things they could be doing. They still had other open cases besides the Heidi Beauchamp case and a wasted afternoon in court was the last thing they needed, but they both knew it had to be done.

Art's cell phone rang and he fished it out of his pocket, mentally making a note that he would have to put it on vibrate before they went into the courthouse. "Detective Hauxwell," he said into his phone. "What? Fuck!" Michaels looked over at him as he swore and saw that Art wore a grimace.

"Yeah. Okay. I'll have to call you back later. Yeah, thanks." He hung up the phone and looked at Michaels who glanced over at him expectantly.

"What was that all about?"

"Looks like we've got another body – this time over in the fourth precinct."

"Fuck," Michaels said under his breath before asking, "Same MO?"

"Yeah."

"Fuck," he said again, louder.

"Fuck is right," Art agreed as they pulled into a parking space in front of the courthouse. "Come on, let's get this over with," he said as he opened the car door and got out into the rain.

* * * *

After they'd both testified, the two detectives left the courthouse. It had stopped raining and the sun was beginning to break through the clouds. Art pulled out his phone and called the detective who'd called him from the fourth precinct. They had a brief conversation and the other detective agreed to send what they had so far over to Art so he could compare the information with the Heidi Beauchamp file. When Art hung up, he turned to his partner and told him what the other detective had said.

"It sure sounds like another victim," Michaels said.

"Unfortunately, I agree."

They rode in silence for a while, each lost in his own thoughts until Michaels had an idea. "Maybe we should widen our perimeter," he suggested. "So far, we've been going on the idea that our perp has only been dumping bodies in the city – what if he's also been dumping bodies outside the city?"

"God, I hope not. That would mean the possibility of there being a lot more victims. But you're right, we should look into it. Maybe start checking with outlying communities and see if they've had any similar cases in the past couple of years."

When they got back to the station, Michaels went to talk to their captain and apprise him of the latest victim and let him know they were going to start reaching out to other agencies. Meanwhile, Art went straight to his desk and retrieved the information the detective at the fourth precinct had sent him. He went through the information and by the time Michaels came back to his desk, Art was convinced this latest victim had definitely been killed by the same guy. He told Michaels this and handed him the information he'd just gone through, allowing him to go over it as well.

They were in agreement that the victim in the fourth precinct was the work of the same killer. There was no way they could avoid the fact that they were hunting for a serial killer. It was getting late in the day now and the captain had been on his way out when Michaels had talked to him, but in the morning, they knew they'd have to have a meeting with the captain and talk about requesting a city-wide task force to be set up – it may even become a state-wide task force if Michaels' hunch panned out. If the bodies kept piling up, they might even need to bring in the FBI.

Art pulled up a list of local law enforcement agencies in the state while Michaels printed out a map. They began circling all the outlying communities that surrounded the city and then they began making calls. Being as late in the day as it was now, they might not be able to reach anybody in the surrounding communities until tomorrow, but they were going

to try.

* * * *

It hadn't taken long for Tom to find out that he'd been right about the food in the Smith Falls jail. It was definitely not Polly's, and it was most probably standard institution fare. He'd barely picked at his lunch and now he sat there with his dinner tray on his lap feeling disinclined to eat it. It wasn't just because the food wasn't as good as Polly's, it was also because he was worried that if he ate, he would have to poop, and doing that in front of three men on the completely exposed toilet in the middle of the cell was something he was not looking forward to doing. It had been bad enough when he'd had to pee, but taking a crap would be a whole different kind of humiliation. He'd been shocked and embarrassed earlier when Miller had awakened from his nap and jumped down from his top bunk and nonchalantly dropped his pants and perched on the toilet as if there was no one else in the room. Tom was not looking forward to the degradation he knew he would feel when he, himself, would need to go. But he knew it couldn't be helped because he'd always had a high metabolism and he couldn't go too long without food; once he ate, he would inevitably need to poop. His stomach had been growling all afternoon and he knew that not eating would only cause him to have severe hunger pangs during the night if he didn't give in and start eating, so he forced himself to eat what was in front of him.

After he'd eaten and the food trays had been taken away, Tom stretched out on his bunk and stared at the bottom of the upper bunk. He felt lost and alone; helpless to help himself. Except for his mother, there was no one who believed him – he hadn't even been sure his attorney had believed the things Tom had told him, but it was his attorney's job to defend him whether he believed him or not, so he guessed it didn't much matter. He was helpless to help himself and he

was helpless to help the other girl who'd been kidnapped by Nancy's killer. Again, he began mentally berating himself for ever going to the police in the first place.

Tom heard the jangling of keys but the sound didn't register until the cell door began rumbling open and he looked up to see an officer standing outside the cell.

"Hopkins, you've got a visitor," he announced.

Tom got up and was escorted away from the cell and taken to a visiting room where he saw his mother waiting for him. She looked up as he came into the room, a brave smile on her face. Tom was filled with love for his mother in that moment; he knew she would never abandon him.

"Tom," Mrs. Connor gushed. "How are they treating you? Are you okay?"

"I'm fine, mom. Thanks for coming." He sat down opposite her and she reached for his hand. They sat looking at each other, their hands entwined in the center of the table.

"Are you sure they're treating you okay?"

"Yes, mom. Don't worry. I'm okay."

"I still can't believe this is happening," she said quietly. "I wish your father was here. He would be so much more help to you than I am."

"I wish he were here too," Tom said. "But YOU are here and that means everything to me." He could tell his mother was fighting back tears, so Tom changed the subject saying, "My lawyer will be coming tomorrow. I'm sure he'll get me out of here before too much longer."

"Do you think?" his mother asked hopefully.

"Yes, I do. So you shouldn't worry," Tom said with a conviction that he didn't feel. He hoped it would be true, but he had no way of knowing whether his lawyer would be able to get him out of jail or not. He'd been in such shock after he'd been arrested that he couldn't even remember everything his lawyer had said last night, but he couldn't let his mother know how worried he was because he didn't want *her* to be worried.

"Will they let me bring you anything from home,

Tom?"

"I don't think so mom, not right now anyway. Besides, I'll be out of here in no time so there's no sense bringing anything anyway, right?" He smiled at her and she returned his smile.

"I suppose you're right. You'll be out of here in no time," she echoed.

They sat holding hands and smiling at each other, neither knowing what to say and his mother's worried eyes searched Tom's face. When it was announced that their time was up, his mother said, already? And then they were standing and she was hugging him goodbye and Tom was trying not to cry. He didn't want to go back to his cell; he wanted to go home with his mother. But he knew he couldn't. His mother wore a brave face as he was escorted from the room. The door closed behind him with a thud and Tom was taken back to his cell.

* * * *

As they'd suspected, Art and Michaels hadn't been able to get ahold of anyone in any of the outlying communities they'd contacted so far that could give them any information regarding ongoing investigations so they'd had to leave messages. Frustrated, Art said they should call it a night and start fresh the following day and Michaels agreed. They decided to stop off at Duffy's and grab a burger and a beer before going home.

As they sat sipping beer, they talked about the case. It seemed to Art that he was living and breathing the Heidi Beauchamp case these past few days and when he told Michaels this, Michaels told him he was not alone. Michaels had a family and, specifically, a twenty year old daughter who went to college in the city – he told Art it was keeping him awake at night worrying that his daughter might be in danger, along with every other young woman in the city. While he didn't want to spread panic in the city by going public with the

case, he also didn't want to be responsible for not warning people that there was a serial killer in their midst. Art could sympathize with his partner; he was feeling much the same. They were both feeling frustrated. They were helpless to catch a killer without having any clues to help them figure out who he was.

"We need to get everyone together, including the detectives from the fourth, and go over this together again. Maybe we can make some headway? Bounce some stuff off each other?" Art suggested as they ate their burgers.

"Yeah, sounds good. Maybe we could informally start a task force on this thing – even if we have to do it after hours – until we find out if the brass is going to form an official one."

"We need to do *something*," Art agreed. "Let's call everyone tomorrow and see what we can set up."

The two men finished their burgers and had one more beer before going their separate ways. It was lightly raining again, and Art walked along in the rain wishing it could wash away the horrible feeling he had in his gut. They now had five young women who were most likely victims of the same killer and Art had a bad feeling that they were going to find more as they expanded their investigation outside of the city. They needed something, *anything*, to go on to get this investigation moving or there was nothing they would be able to do to stop this guy – and they *had to* stop him.

Art's mind drifted back to his niece. He might not be able to warn all the young women out there, but he could warn his own family. He had only the one niece who was in the age range to fit the profile they had so far, so he would call her and warn her to be careful without telling her why. She trusted him, she would do as he asked without questioning it. He reached into his pocket and pulled out his phone. He brought up her number and hit send and it started ringing on the other end.

"Hey Uncle Art! How are you?"

CHAPTER 21

Chief Creighton had been reading through Hanson's report on the prisoner exchange when Hanson came back into his office. Looking up, he'd asked Hanson what was up. He hadn't been prepared for Hanson's reply. *Chief, I know it's going to sound crazy*, Hanson had said, *but I'm beginning to think Hopkins is telling the truth.*

He'd been surprised at Hanson's revelation, but he'd been wondering about Hopkins himself and after hearing what Hanson had to tell him, Creighton was even more inclined to believe that Tom Hopkins had nothing whatsoever to do with Nancy Wilcox's murder. He'd gone home the previous evening and done a bit of research on people who claim to be able to communicate with the dead and he'd read some interesting stuff. He still didn't know if he believed in it or not, but he did believe that Tom Hopkins was not a killer.

Creighton had come into to work this morning and continued his research. He'd also run a background check on Tom Hopkins and found nothing that would make him suspect Hopkins was either a criminal or a crackpot. Hopkins had never had any kind of issue with police before. He'd never even had so much as a parking ticket. Hopkins had never come to the police to report anything before; he'd never given a witness statement or been a part of any investigation before. The only thing Creighton could find involving Tom Hopkins were reports from the accident that had killed Rosalie Hopkins. Other than that, Hopkins seemed to have had no other contact with police – ever – until now.

Creighton then contacted one of his buddies on the City Council and inquired about Hopkins' time as caretaker at Oak Lawn. He'd been told that Hopkins had taken over for the former caretaker about fifteen years ago and that he'd always done a more than satisfactory job maintaining the cemetery grounds. The Council had never received any formal complaints against Hopkins. Sure, his friend had told him,

there'd been various rumors that Hopkins had told people strange things now and again, but no one ever formally filed a complaint about him. Hopkins had lived in the caretaker's cottage adjacent to the cemetery since shortly after taking over the position and he'd always taken exemplary care of the home. The City Council had never considered replacing Hopkins in all the years since he'd taken over the position as caretaker, Creighton was informed, and the Council was hoping that it wouldn't have to find a replacement for him now. He was told that the Council had instructed the Bright Creek Department of Public Works to maintain the cemetery until "this mess" was straightened out and Hopkins could return to work.

After talking with his friend from City Council, Creighton contacted Mrs. Connor and asked her if she would come in and speak with him. She'd readily agreed and Creighton sat at his desk now, waiting for her to arrive. He still wasn't sure what he'd be able to do for Tom Hopkins, and he still wasn't sure if Hopkins could speak with the dead, but he was going to do his best to find out.

* * * *

Detective Young was feeling pressured. He was sure Tom Hopkins was somehow involved in Nancy Wilcox's murder, but he was hard-pressed to find something concrete before his meeting with the prosecutor that afternoon. He'd just returned from Bright Creek where he and his team had gone over Hopkins' home next to the cemetery. They hadn't found anything useful and they hadn't found anything to tie Hopkins to Nancy's disappearance – or to her murder. By all appearances, Hopkins was simply a small-town cemetery caretaker. But Young was positive there was more to the man than that. Young was positive that Hopkins must have held the girl captive someplace far removed from where he lived and Young was determined to find that place. But it looked like he wouldn't be finding it before his appointment with the

prosecutor unless he could get something out of Hopkins before then, so he decided to go over to the jail and talk to Hopkins.

When Hopkins was brought into the room, Young was shuffling papers on the table in front of him. "Mr. Hopkins, I just wanted to ask you a few questions if you don't mind?" he asked as Hopkins sat down across from him.

"Where's my lawyer?" Tom asked.

"Well I didn't think you'd mind if I asked you a few questions without your lawyer here, but if you want me to call him in, I can certainly do that," Young said.

"What kind of questions?"

"Just a few follow-up questions, Mr. Hopkins. Such as...." he said as he shuffled through his papers until he came up with a sealed plastic bag containing the notes that were confiscated from Tom in Bright Creek, "...do you recognize these notes?"

"Yes. Those are my notes. They took them from when they put me in jail in Bright Creek."

"Very good. Thank you for confirming that for me," Young said. "Now, you said you took those notes while you were talking to Nancy Wilcox?"

"Yes."

"And you were where? When you took the notes?"

"In my kitchen."

"In Bright Creek, you mean? In your house next to the cemetery?"

"Yes, that's right."

"And this was before or after Nancy died?" Young asked, implying that Tom had written these notes before Nancy died.

"I don't know what you're getting after here, but I want my lawyer present if I'm going to answer any more questions," Tom stated with resolve.

"I see," Young responded. "I just thought you might want to save yourself some money. I know attorneys can be

expensive. But we can do it your way. Maybe you've got lots of money, how do I know? You could have a vacation home or a hunting cabin for all I know," Young said, fishing.

"Well I don't," Tom replied. "And I want my lawyer."

"Okay. I guess I'll go then. I'll contact your lawyer and schedule a formal interview. I appreciate your time, Mr. Hopkins." Young gathered up his papers and put them into a folder before standing and going to the door where an officer waited on the other side. The officer opened the door and Young left. After Young walked away, Tom stood up and the officer escorted him back to his cell.

* * * *

Young sat waiting as the prosecutor read through his report. When he was finished, the prosecutor looked up and gave Young a disgusted look.

"What are you trying to do to me, Young? This isn't enough to try the guy for murder! If this is all you've got, you might as well cut him loose. I can't go in front of a judge with this!"

"But he gave us information that hasn't been released. How would he know all that stuff if he wasn't involved in the girl's murder?" Young argued.

"I don't know. But we need more than this to bind him over. Besides, I talked to Chief Creighton out in Bright Creek and he tells me this Hopkins guy claims he got the information from the dead girl's spirit. Now I'm not saying I believe it, but I have worked with psychics and mediums before, and I know there are people who can do that kind of stuff – who's to say this guy can't do it as well?"

"Come on! Are you serious? This guy is involved in the murder – I'd be willing to bet on it!" Young retorted.

"Well according to Chief Creighton, the guy doesn't even have a car for chrissakes! How do you think he abducted a girl if he doesn't even have a car? You gotta let him go unless

you have something concrete that I can take in front of a judge."

"But..."

"We're done here, Young. Now get out, I've got other things to do."

Disgusted, Young got up and left the prosecutor's office. He could still get away with keeping Hopkins locked up a bit longer before an arraignment and he was going to take advantage of every minute of that time. He was determined to find something to get Hopkins bound over for trial and he was going to work on it around the clock if he had to. The first thing he was going to do was go back to Hopkins' house and look again. He decided to swing by and pick up a uniformed officer to go with him then he was heading back to Bright Creek.

* * * *

Tom's cellmates looked up as he was brought back in. Zim was doing sit-ups again and he paused long enough to ask Tom, "Your mom again, Hopkins?" Miller and Krantz both laughed and Zim said, "Shut up you assholes. At least Hopkins here has a mother who'll come to visit him. Who do you two dickheads got?" The laughter stopped and they went quiet. Zim looked back up at Tom.

"No. Not my mom," Tom told him. "It was Detective Young."

"Prick," Miller muttered. "I hate that guy."

Tom and Zim ignored him and Zim got up off the floor and said to Tom, "What'd he want? Was your lawyer there? You didn't say nothing, did you?"

"He wanted to ask questions. And no, my lawyer wasn't there. I told him I wanted my lawyer if he was gonna ask me questions, so he left."

"Good for you, Hopkins. You gotta watch that guy – he can be slippery. Don't let him trick you into saying anything

that he can use against you," Zim advised.

"Yeah. I won't. Thanks."

Zim went back down on the floor and started push-ups. He was in excellent shape and Tom couldn't help but wonder if it was because he'd been in jail so many times or because he was really into fitness and exercise. Tom had to admire Zim's mettle, he sure made the best of being confined. Tom found it a bit ironic that Zim was seemingly in such good health when he dealt drugs for a living. The two things just didn't seem to go hand-in-hand in Tom's mind – but what did he know about it?

Tom laid down on his bunk. He began to wonder what the purpose of Young's visit had been. Clearly the detective hadn't wanted Tom's attorney there, or he would have set it up ahead of time. Tom wondered what Young had been fishing for and what his visit today might mean for his case. He wished he could discuss it with his cellmates but he didn't feel comfortable going into too much detail about why he was in jail. He didn't want to let it slip that he could communicate with spirits because he didn't want these guys to think he was crazy. He wasn't sure why it mattered to him that they might think he was crazy – but it did. Oddly enough, Zim was the first guy that had ever been somewhat friendly to Tom; he'd never had very many friends in Bright Creek and it was somehow refreshing to meet a stranger that didn't automatically think he was weird. He knew most people pre-judged him – even if they weren't aware of his reputation – because of his occupation, but here in this cell he was just a regular guy. Tom kind of liked the feeling of being just a regular guy, he just wished he hadn't had to be arrested for murder before being treated like one.

* * * *

After reaching out to several surrounding communities, Art and Michaels were beginning to think they'd

been wrong about finding more victims outside of the city and Art was relieved. They'd received call-backs from all the agencies they'd left messages with the day before and none of them had any cases similar to theirs. They decided to finish checking the rest of the towns they'd circled, then they would let it rest. If they didn't find any similar cases, they wouldn't spread their perimeter any further right now.

They only had five more calls to make when Michaels got a possible hit. He signaled to Art and Art came around the desks to lean in and listen as Michaels pulled the receiver away from his ear so his partner could hear. They were on the line with a police officer at the Smith Falls Police Department who was telling them they was an ongoing case in which a girl's body had been found dumped in a ditch in a rural area of Smith Falls. The officer couldn't confirm any details of the case for them, though, and told Michaels he would have to have the investigating detective call him back. Art stepped back and leaned against the desk while Michaels gave the officer in Smith Falls his information. When he hung up, he turned to Art and sighed.

"God I hope their case isn't a match," Michaels said wearily.

"Me too. Guess all we can do is wait and see. In the meantime, we've got five more calls to make." Art walked back around the desks and sat back down.

"I'm going to go take a piss first," Michaels told him as he stood up and headed for the door. Art nodded then picked up his phone and dialed the next number on their list.

* * * *

Young and the uniformed officer arrived at Tom's house and Young walked around the yard while the officer unlocked the door with the key they'd gotten earlier. Young still had his warrant and was determined to find something. He stood looking out over the cemetery and decided to take a look

around over there. He called to the other officer and told him to wait there while he took a look around then he walked across the yard and into the cemetery. There was a little road running through the cemetery and Young went in that direction, walking between rows of headstones he made his way closer to the road. When he reached it, he felt a sense of relief; walking over the graves made him a bit uncomfortable. He wondered how any *normal* person could ever be an undertaker or work in a cemetery because the thought of it creeped him out.

He saw a shed up ahead beside the road and he headed straight for it. Was it possible that Hopkins had kept the girl in there? When he reached the shed, Young found it padlocked; he would have to send the other officer with the warrant to get the key. In the meantime, he walked around the small building, which was partially covered with ivy, looking for a window but he saw none. He looked across the road and scanned the cemetery as far as he could see in each direction. He thought he could see a recent grave in the distance and wondered if it was Nancy Wilcox's grave. He decided to go back to Hopkins' house and send the officer off for keys to the shed and then he'd come back and investigate further.

As he walked back toward the house, Detective Young was unaware of the voices that surrounded him. *Where's Tom? Why hasn't he come back?* a man's voice asked, but Young couldn't hear it. *Have they found her yet?* a girl's voice asked and fell on deaf ears as Young kept walking. *Please! You have to help me!* the girl's voice pleaded, but Young didn't respond and she started to cry.

There, there, Nancy. Don't cry. Tom will be back, I'm sure of it! Don't give up hope! Tom won't let you down.

* * * *

Taking his first dump in the Smith Falls jail was one of the worst things Tom had ever done. His fellow prisoners seemed to have no qualms about using the communal toilet,

but for Tom it had been a huge thing just taking his first piss in it – when it came to crapping in it, he just hadn't been able to bring himself to do it. It had been brewing inside his bowels for two days and his gas had gotten so bad that afternoon that the other inmates had started complaining about it. In the end, Krantz had threatened him with bodily harm if he didn't take a shit already and put them out of their misery. And so he had, and it had been the single most mortifying act of Tom's life.

Now that he'd recovered from his embarrassment, the other inmates were ribbing him about the whole episode. "Popped your cherry, Hopkins!" Miller said and they all laughed.

"That was one stinky shit!" Krantz added and they all agreed. Tom could feel his face turning red (again) as they laughed at him. He wished they'd just let it go, but they seemed to find his discomfort hilarious.

"Lighten up, Hopkins!" Zim chortled. "We've all been there!"

"Yeah, we're just giving you some shit....about *your shit*," Miller said and they all laughed harder.

"Next time, don't wait so fucking long cuz we don't wanna smell your farts for two days first!" Krantz complained.

Tom grinned in response to that – he had to admit his gas had been pretty noxious – and he finally started to relax and laugh along with them. The banter moved on to a discussion of some of the worst craps they'd ever taken, and that conversation evolved into a session of bragging about their shits. Tom laughed along with the other three men, but had no stories that he wanted to share about crapping. The others didn't seem to notice though, and kept on with their competitive bragging.

As Tom and his cellmates were laughing about shit, Young was on his way back from Bright Creek after finding nothing new in his second search of Tom's house and the cemetery grounds. They'd gotten the keys to the shed but found nothing incriminating there either. Young was annoyed

that he hadn't been able to find anything he could take to the prosecutor. He was in a pissy mood and was ready to call it a day. After dropping the uniformed officer at the station, he went to get a drink (or two) before going home to his wife and kids. He hated going home when he was in a bad mood; his wife always accused him of bringing his work – and his bad moods – home and he didn't feel like hearing her bitch all night. A few stiff drinks would at least make *him* feel better.

* * * *

Art hung around waiting to see if they got a return call from the detective in Smith Falls but it was growing apparent that they wouldn't be hearing from him today. Michaels had left over an hour ago and Art was getting hungry. He decided to wait another half an hour and if he hadn't heard from the guy by then, he was out of there. One good thing about not being married was that there was nobody waiting at home that he had to answer to; he could come and go as he pleased and not have to worry about having a fight when he got home late. Most of the other "good things" about being single didn't exist in Art's life. Truth be told, he would have loved to have someone waiting for him at home but at this stage of the game, there were no prospects on the horizon.

Art had been married twice. The first time was when he was fresh out of the academy. They'd both been young and in love. Art thought he would spend the rest of his life with her but once he started on the beat, things quickly went downhill. His wife hadn't been able to handle the danger and risk that came with his job, especially after Art had been involved in a scuffle with a fleeing suspect who was under the influence of drugs and wielding a knife. The suspect had slashed at Art with the knife and given him a shallow cut on the arm. He'd received five stitches and his wife had been beside herself. No matter how hard Art tried to convince her that it was a one-off and wouldn't be happening every day, his wife began worrying

every time Art left for work. She'd driven herself into such a state of anxiety every day that she'd needed to start going to therapy. Six months into therapy she'd declared that she'd had enough – she told Art that she loved him, but she couldn't take being married to a cop. She wanted children, she'd told him, but she couldn't have children with him and then live with the knowledge that her children might one day become fatherless because of Art's job. Their divorce became final just after their second anniversary.

Art got married for the second time about fifteen years later. He'd been devastated by his divorce and thrown himself into his job to forget about the pain. He worked as many shifts as he could get. It took him a long time to get back to a place where he could even consider dating again – it was difficult going from being with the person you'd planned to spend the rest of your life with to suddenly being without her – and after he'd started dating again, it took him a long time to find someone he felt a connection with. His second wife was a nurse. Art met her at Duffy's one night when they'd both been sitting at the bar. They struck up a conversation and she told him that she'd had a long day; she was upset after losing a patient. She'd come into Duffy's on a whim because she hadn't felt like going home and being alone.

Art felt a connection with his second wife after that first night of conversation but he hadn't had the nerve to ask her out. Duffy's was his usual watering hole and he knew she wasn't a regular there, but he started seeing her there more and more often. He'd been too dense to realize she was coming there in hopes of seeing him. She eventually came right out and told him she liked him and that she wanted to see more of him. After that they'd started dating.

Nine months later, they went to City Hall and got married. Not long after they'd been married, Art's second wife was diagnosed with pancreatic cancer. The disease progressed quickly and robbed them of their planned future together. Art was in his mid-forties then and now, in his fifties, he still hoped

to find someone to grow old with – but so far it hadn't happened. He was, by now, a creature of habit and his habits didn't really put him in places where he met too many women. His bachelor life mostly consisted of work, Duffy's, and home, with occasional weekends spent with his family.

Art was thinking about his family when Michaels' phone started to ring; he got up and went around the desks to answer it. "Detective Hauxwell," he said as he picked up the receiver. Discovering that it wasn't the detective from Smith Falls, he grabbed a sticky note and took down a message before hanging up. He stuck the note in the middle of Michaels' computer screen then looked up at the clock on the wall and decided he'd waited long enough. He thought he might splurge and go out for a steak tonight. There was a small steakhouse not far from his apartment – nothing high dollar or anything, but decent – so he left the station and set off for the steakhouse, his stomach rumbling at the thought of a thick, juicy steak.

* * * *

Jenny Singleton had gotten her driver's license and she was in Bright Creek – on her own for the very first time. She'd come to visit friends and while she was in town, she'd also driven by her old house. Someone else lived there now and seeing the house made Jenny sad so she went to the cemetery to visit her mother's grave. Even though she knew her mother had moved on, it still made her feel closer to her somehow, seeing her mother's name engraved on the stone and bringing her flowers there. After sitting by her mother's grave, quietly talking to her mother, she looked for Tom but didn't see him around, so she walked over to his cottage. As she came within sight of the cottage, she saw two men – one of them wearing a police uniform – getting into a car in front of Tom's house. Jenny waited until the car had left, then she went to Tom's front door and knocked. After knocking several times and

waiting, no one answer the door. Concerned, Jenny decided to drive to Tom's mother's house. When she arrived, she got out of the car and went to the front door. She stood on the front porch ringing the bell and when a woman opened the door and looked out, Jenny smiled.

"Hello," Jenny said. "Are you Mrs. Connor?"

"Yes, I am," Mrs. Connor responded smiling back at her. "What can do for you?"

"Well... um... my name is Jenny Singleton and I'm... um... sort of a friend of Tom's?" she said, unsure if she should be calling herself Tom's friend or not.

"Oh," Mrs. Connor said, surprised. "Come in," she offered and stepped back to hold the door open for Jenny to come inside.

"Thank you," Jenny said as she stepped into the house. "I'm really sorry to bother you, but I was at the cemetery just now and I didn't see Tom around anywhere and I thought I would check to see if he was home but then I saw a car with two men leaving Tom's house and one of them was a police officer and..." she knew she was rambling and she paused before continuing, "...and then Tom didn't answer his door and I was worried."

"Why don't you come in and sit down Jenny," Mrs. Connor suggested, "So we can talk?" She led Jenny into the living room and indicated that she should sit and Jenny did.

After they were both seated Mrs. Connor began, "I don't know how well you know Tom..."

"I met Tom at the cemetery," Jenny explained. "He gave me a message from my mom who died last year."

"Oh!" Mrs. Connor brightened, "Then you know about Tom's gift then?"

"Yes, and I think it's amazing," Jenny said with genuine awe. "Is Tom alright, Mrs. Connor?"

"Well..." Mrs. Connor said, not sure how much she should tell the girl but not wanting to lie. "Tom's in jail," she finally said bluntly.

"What? In *jail*? But what for?" Jenny asked with dismay. So Mrs. Connor told her.

"I can't believe this," Jenny said quietly when Mrs. Connor was finished telling her what had happened to Tom.

CHAPTER 22

The next morning, Jenny Singleton was on her way back to Smith Falls from Bright Creek. After having spent the night with her friends, Jenny decided she would go to the Smith Falls jail to see Tom Hopkins. She didn't tell her father she would be stopping at the jail on her way home and she hoped he wouldn't be too mad if he found out later, but she'd been afraid her father wouldn't let her visit Tom if she'd asked for permission. Jenny still couldn't believe Tom had been arrested for Nancy Wilcox's murder and she felt she needed to do something to help him; she knew he hadn't killed Nancy.

As Jenny was driving, Tom and his cellmates were finishing breakfast. After breakfast they would be taken out to the small fenced-in exercise area at the back of the jail. They were allowed to go outside twice a day, weather permitting, and Tom was looking forward to having a bit of time outside of their cell. He'd talked to his attorney first thing that morning and his attorney had told him he'd not yet received Tom's arraignment date. He assured Tom that the notice was forthcoming, and he would let Tom know as soon as he received it, then he would be able to meet with the prosecutor to discuss bail. Until that time, all Tom could do was wait.

After being escorted to the exercise yard, Tom heard someone call his name. "Hopkins!" He looked around and saw an officer who'd just stepped outside conferring with the officer who had brought them out and the man waved him over.

"You've got a visitor," the officer informed him.

Tom was escorted into the visiting room where Jenny Singleton sat waiting for him. He was shocked and surprised to see her there; he couldn't imagine why she'd come. Coming into the room, Tom sat down at the table across from Jenny. Looking at her with concern he said, "Jenny, what are you doing here? You shouldn't be here."

"I had to come. I heard you were in jail and I just had

to come see you," she responded. "Your mom told me what happened. She told me the police don't believe that you talked to Nancy Wilcox and I want to help you."

"That's really nice of you Jenny, but I don't see how you can help me. I know that *you* believe in my gift, but I doubt you could convince the police of anything. They think I'm lying about where I got the information Nancy gave me. They won't listen to me and they won't even look for the van Nancy told me about. They think *I'm* the one who killed Nancy."

"And I know that you're not! I can't believe they arrested you! But you just leave this to me, Tom. I'll get someone to listen to you," Jenny said resolutely.

"I appreciate that, Jenny, but I don't see what you can do..."

"Just trust me, Tom. I'm going to get you out of here."

* * * *

Detective Young was running late. It was after ten by the time he arrived at the Smith Falls police station. He stopped briefly to check in with the desk sergeant to see if he had any messages and was told he'd received a call the day before from a detective in the city. Young took the hand-written message back to his desk and picked up the phone, wondering why a city detective would be calling him. He dialed the number printed on the message and waited for someone to pick up.

When the phone was answered by a man identifying himself as Detective Michaels, Young identified himself and said he was returning the detective's call from the previous afternoon. He apologized for not returning the call sooner and explained that he'd been out of the office all afternoon working on a case and he'd just arrived back at the office this morning. He asked Detective Michaels what he could do for him.

After a brief chat, Detective Young hung up the phone and leaned back in his chair and smiled. It seemed his day had

just gotten exponentially better. Two city detectives were coming to Smith Falls to sit down with him and discuss the Nancy Wilcox case – and they were interested in interviewing his suspect. He *knew* Hopkins was involved in the girl's murder and these other detectives might be the key to making his arrest stick. After taking a few moments to gloat, Young put in a call to Hopkins' attorney and asked how soon they could meet at the jail. He considered calling the prosecutor's office, but decided to hold off until after he'd spoken with the other detectives – no sense involving the prosecutor until he knew exactly what the city detectives were looking for and what they might know about Tom Hopkins that would help him keep Hopkins behind bars.

* * * *

Michaels hung up the phone and swiveled in his chair to look at Art. "Looks like we finally might catch a break, partner."

"What'd you mean? Who was that?"

"That was the detective from Smith Falls. It seems his case is very similar to ours but with one big difference – *he* has a suspect. He's being held in the Smith Falls jail, some guy named Tom Hopkins. I told him we were heading out there to talk to him and we most likely would want to interview his suspect," Michaels said, smiling like the Cheshire cat.

"What are we waiting for?" Art asked as he jumped up from his chair. "Let's get out there and talk to the guy!"

The two detectives left the station and headed for Smith Falls. As Michaels drove the car toward the interstate, Art put the address of the Smith Falls Police Department into the navigation system. He couldn't believe they might actually be face-to-face with a suspect soon. Could it possibly be the guy they were looking for? He wondered what kind of evidence the detective in Smith Falls had found, especially since they'd found next to nothing themselves. This question popping into

his head made his mood instantly drop and he said so to Michaels.

"What if the victim in the Smith Falls case isn't related?" Art said.

"Then we're back to square one – but what if she *is* related?" Michaels countered. "This could be the break we need."

"I'll feel better once we get out there and talk to this other detective, see what he's got and see what he's got on this Hopkins guy."

"Me too. Smith Falls is at least an hour away. If this Hopkins guy is our perp and he's been dumping bodies that far out of the city then he's been a lot more active than we thought. Who knows how many more bodies there could be out there."

The thought of that sickened Art. He didn't want to assume that this Tom Hopkins was the killer they were looking for, but if he was... He decided to wait on that line of thinking until they had some hard facts. But regardless of that, if their perp had dumped a body in Smith Falls, where had he abducted the victim? He could have picked her up in Smith Falls or any of the surrounding communities. Hell, he could have picked her up in the city and taken her way out there just to get rid of her body. If their killer had been in Smith Falls, that meant he was a threat to young women not only in the city, but in the suburbs and the outlying communities as well, and that was hitting too close to home for Art. His niece lived in Smith Falls and he was afraid for her now more than ever.

Art was startled from his thoughts by the ringing of his phone. He took it out of his pocket and gruffly answered it. His manner instantly softened when he heard the voice on the other end of the line.

"Uncle Art, this is Jenny. I need your help."

* * * *

When Art hung up after talking to his niece, he didn't know what to think. He knew Jenny would never lie to him, but what she'd just told him seemed too incredible to be true. Was it really possible for someone to talk to spirits? If so, could it be possible the man being held for murder in Smith Falls had the ability to do so? It all sounded crazy to Art, but he'd promised Jenny he would give Tom Hopkins the benefit of the doubt, so that's what he was going to do.

"What was that all about?" Michaels asked. Art wasn't sure whether to share what Jenny had told him with his partner or not – it was pretty far-fetched – but as he sat debating, Michaels demanded, "Well?"

"That was my niece, Jenny. It seems she knows this guy Tom Hopkins that they're holding out in Smith Falls and she says he's definitely not a killer. She says he's some kind of psychic who can talk to spirits..."

"You mean a medium," Michaels interrupted, correcting him. When Art gave him a how the hell would you know that look, Michaels explained, "My wife loves those shows about mediums on TV."

"Anyway," Art continued, "Jenny says this Hopkins guy can talk to spirits and he went to the police with information he says he got from the spirit of their murder victim. Jenny wants me to get Hopkins out of jail. She says the guy is legit and she knows he's legit because he gave her a message from her mom's spirit – that's my sister-in-law who was killed in a car accident a while back – and from her great grandmother. She says he's the real deal."

"This case is getting more and more interesting by the minute," Michaels said. "I can't wait to tell my wife about this one! We... I mean *she* watches that stuff on TV all the time. This one time she made me go to one of those gallery readings – that's what they call 'em when a bunch of people go see these mediums, like an audience, you know? And the mediums start throwing out these messages that they're getting from spirits. It's actually pretty interesting. Lots of people believe in that

stuff, you know."

"And what's *your* take on it? Do you think it's for real?" Art asked, genuinely interested in what his partner would say.

"Well... let's just say I don't *not* believe in it. I mean, it could be possible, right? And a lot of people swear that mediums are for real. Even my wife has received messages from her dead relatives that she swears were things nobody could possibly have known, and she was convinced the messages came from spirits."

"I don't know if I buy it," Art responded. "But Jenny's a smart, level-headed girl. I don't think she'd be easily fooled," he said. "I promised her I would stay open-minded and give Hopkins a chance. But he's going to have to be good to convince *me*."

"This should prove to be a very interesting day," Michaels observed. "I can't wait to tell my wife about it!"

* * * *

It was Chief Creighton's day off and he was on his way to Smith Falls to talk to Tom Hopkins. He'd spoken with Mrs. Connor the previous afternoon and he was having major doubts that Hopkins should be in jail; he was becoming more convinced Tom Hopkins didn't have anything whatsoever to do with Nancy Wilcox's death. Creighton couldn't hear Pete's voice egging him on and telling him to believe in Hopkins as he drove out to Route 90 headed for Smith Falls, but Pete was there riding along with him and talking nonstop.

When he reached Smith Falls, he planned to go to the jail and talk to Hopkins and see if there was anything else Tom could tell him about Nancy's murder. He still had the notes he'd taken when Tom first came to the station and he had a copy of them with him now; he hoped Tom would go over things with him one more time so he could add more detail to his notes. He'd scribbled down only a few of what seemed to be key points during their initial interview. Creighton was

determined to investigate the information Tom claimed he'd received from Nancy's ghost if only to appease himself.

Doubt had been nagging at him since before Hanson had admitted that he, too, was beginning to have doubts about Hopkins' guilt. If Hopkins could give him any further information, and if any of that information panned out, then he would personally go to the prosecutor and present anything he found that might remove suspicion from Tom Hopkins and help them find Nancy's killer. Creighton didn't believe Tom Hopkins had killed Nancy. He wasn't sure when he'd become so sure of it, but the past couple of days it had been repeating in his mind on a loop – *Hopkins didn't kill Nancy* – as if a recording were being played in his ear.

He still wasn't sure he believed Hopkins could communicate with spirits, but he was determined to try to find out if it was true. Creighton didn't know how these things were supposed to work, but in the research he'd done he'd read that spirit mediums had the ability to contact spirits and ask questions and he thought maybe he could ask Hopkins to contact his own deceased mother and ask for information that there was no way Hopkins could know. If Hopkins was for real, he should be able to do that, right? Creighton needed convincing if he was going to go out on a limb and try to help Hopkins.

With his plan firmly in mind, Creighton turned off Route 90 and into Smith Falls and drove directly to the jail. He pulled into the parking lot, turned off the engine and got out of the car. As he closed his car door and locked it, the car parked next to him started with a rumble and he stepped out of the way as the young girl behind the wheel looked over her shoulder and slowly began to back out. He stood where he was until she was safely out of her parking space, then he crossed the parking lot and headed for the public entrance to the jail.

Once inside, Creighton went to the officer at the front desk and asked to see Tom Hopkins. He didn't identify himself as a police officer and he wasn't carrying a weapon. He wasn't

there in an official capacity; he was there on a personal level to see if he could satisfy himself that Hopkins was telling the truth about having received his information from a ghost. Creighton was instructed to take a seat and wait, so he sat down and waited.

About half an hour later, Creighton was processed and taken to a visiting room where he sat waiting for them to bring Hopkins in. When the door opened, he stood as Tom entered the room. "Hello Tom," he said.

"Chief Creighton," Tom replied coolly as both men sat down. "What are you doing here?"

"I..."

I brought him here, Pete said. I've been nagging him for days, telling him that you didn't kill that girl, and trying to get him to come over here so you can convince him that you're telling the truth, he said proudly. *Go ahead, tell him I told you that.*

Pete was speaking over what Creighton was saying and Tom stopped him saying, "Pete, be quiet for a minute," then to Creighton he said, "I'm sorry but I missed what you just said."

Creighton looked at Tom, then his eyes scanned the room as he asked, "Did you just say Pete? Is Pete *here*?"

"Yes. He says he brought you here. He says he's been nagging you for days to come here so I could convince you that I'm telling the truth."

"Is that so?" Creighton said with curiosity. After a moment of thought he asked, "Can you ask Pete who his favorite football team is?" He figured he could test Hopkins with something about Pete that wouldn't have been in the paper and wasn't known by everyone in town.

"He says he can hear you and to tell you that it's the Detroit Lions, even though they won't play in the super bowl until hell freezes over. He says you know he's been a Lions fan since he was a kid growing up outside of Detroit..." Tom paused, listening, then went on, "Oh, okay – he also says to tell you that the Cowboys are pussies."

Creighton's eyebrows rose in amazement because Pete had always told him the Cowboys were a bunch of pussies because Pete knew Dallas was Creighton's favorite team. Tom was getting bored, and just a little bit irritated, with the conversation and again he asked, "Why are you here, Chief?"

"It looks like I'm here to try to help you, Tom."

* * * *

When Jenny had hung up from talking to her uncle Art, she'd had an idea. She'd called her dad and told him that she was still in Bright Creek and she wouldn't be home until later that afternoon, then she started the car and backed out of her parking spot at the Smith Falls jail, gone out to Route 90, and driven back to Bright Creek.

She now stood on the porch at Tom's mother's house, ringing the doorbell. When Mrs. Connor answered the door, surprised to see her there again, she explained her idea to Mrs. Connor who readily agreed to go with her to the cemetery to show her where Rosalie was buried. Tom had told Jenny about Mr. McCorkle who hadn't moved on because he liked hanging around – and he'd also told her that Mr. McCorkle's grave was near Rosalie's – so it was Jenny's plan to go to the cemetery, find Andrew McCorkle's grave, and ask Mr. McCorkle for his help.

Jenny knew that her mother had been able to hear her, even though she hadn't been able to hear her mother, so she thought Mr. McCorkle might be able to hear her too. If she could go to the cemetery and tell Mr. McCorkle that Tom was in trouble and needed his help, maybe Mr. McCorkle could go to the jail in Smith Falls and help Tom. She knew Tom would need to convince her uncle Art that he was telling the truth and maybe Mr. McCorkle could help him do that somehow. Jenny thought it was at least worth a try and Mrs. Connor agreed.

The two of them got into Jenny's car and drove to the cemetery. Mrs. Connor directed her as Jenny slowly drove

down the little dirt road that ran through the cemetery. When she told Jenny to stop, they parked and the two of them got out of the car. Mrs. Connor led the way past row after row of graves until she stopped when she reached Rosalie's grave.

They stood there for a moment, each of them reading the inscription on Rosalie's headstone, and after their moment of contemplation, they began to look around, reading the nearby headstones until Mrs. Connor pointed and said excitedly, "There it is. Andrew McCorkle."

Jenny stepped over to Mr. McCorkle's stone and placed her hand on top of it – although she wasn't sure why she felt the need to touch it – she just felt it was the thing to do. She cleared her throat, took a deep breath, then with Mrs. Connor's whispered encouragement she spoke out loud, "Mr. McCorkle? Mr. McCorkle are you here?"

Yes, I'm here.

Jenny hesitated, listening, as if she thought she might hear a response. But of course, she heard nothing and she continued on, "Mr. McCorkle, my name is Jenny. And this is Mrs. Connor – she's Tom's mom. I don't know if you're here or not, but I hope that you are and I hope that you can hear me."

I can hear you, Jenny.

"Tom needs your help Mr. McCorkle. And Nancy's help – if she's here too. Tom's in jail over in Smith Falls. He's been arrested for killing Nancy. Tom needs your help to convince the police that he didn't kill anybody. Please, Mr. McCorkle! Can you go to the jail and help him?"

"That's right, Andy. Tom needs you. Please help my son," Mrs. Connor interjected. "Please!" Mrs. Connor and her husband had known Andrew McCorkle for years before his death. She felt confident that he would want to help Tom – if he could – so she encouraged him the best she could, not knowing if he was there or not. "I know you can help him, Andy, so please do whatever you can do and I'll be eternally grateful. And thank you!"

"Yes, thank you Mr. McCorkle!" Jenny added before taking her hand off the tombstone and saying to Mrs. Connor, "I guess that's all we can do. Hopefully Mr. McCorkle or *someone* heard us and can go help Tom."

Mrs. Connor held out her hand and Jenny took it. "You did good Jenny. I'm sure you've helped Tom."

"I hope so," Jenny responded with uncertainty. They walked back across the lawn toward the car, each of them silently beseeching Mr. McCorkle and hoping he had heard them.

* * * *

Tom had gone back to his cell after meeting with Chief Creighton feeling somewhat hopeful. It hadn't occurred to him to ask Creighton if Jenny Singleton had contacted him or not. Jenny had barely left him this morning before Creighton had shown up and he thought it possible the girl had talked to Creighton before coming to see him that morning, but he couldn't be sure. Whether she had or not, it was looking like Tom had two more people in his corner and this gave him hope.

He sat replaying his conversation with Creighton in his mind. The Chief had said he believed Tom was not Nancy's killer and after having asked Pete several more questions, Creighton had declared he was convinced that Tom truly did have the ability to speak with the dead. Tom had thanked Pete profusely for coming to help him and Pete had seemed pleased that he'd been able to help. Pete had told him that he would go with Creighton and do whatever he could to help Creighton help Tom get out of this place.

Tom had asked Creighton what he planned to do and Creighton told him he was going straight to Detective Young to see what he might be able to do to convince Young to follow up on the leads Tom had given them. If he was unsuccessful, he'd told Tom, he would follow up on them himself and take

whatever he found directly to the prosecutor. Tom sat in his cell, ignoring the banter of his cellmates, and hoping he would be going home soon.

He stretched out on his bunk and laid staring at the bottom of the bunk above him as he tried to be patient; he knew all he could do was wait. When out of nowhere a voice said, *Tom*, he sat up abruptly, nearly banging his head on the upper bunk. He caught himself just in time and leaned back onto his elbows as he swung his feet around to the floor and rolled up off the bed. He stood up and looked around.

“Mr. McCorkle? Is that you?”

“What’re you talking about Hopkins?” Miller asked.

“Shhh!” Tom shushed him. “Are you really here, Mr. McCorkle?” Tom asked as his three cellmates stared at him, confused.

Yes Tom. I’m here. We’ve been wondering where you’ve been.”

“We? Is there someone with you?”

“Who the fuck are you talking to, Hopkins?” Miller demanded. Tom turned to him and told him to shut the fuck up, he wasn’t talking to him. Miller’s mouth hung open with a reply on his tongue until Zim held up a hand to silence him before turning to watch Tom suspiciously.

Nancy is here with me, Tom. Jenny and your mother came to the cemetery asking for our help. I have to say that it’s been quite some time since I’ve left the cemetery grounds – I’d pretty much forgotten I could do it, he chuckled. *But here we are!*

Tom was awash with relief. His mind was racing. Jenny and his mom had gone to the cemetery! Why hadn’t he thought of that himself? He could have sent his mother there after he was first arrested. *Idiot* he scolded himself. Then he began talking to Mr. McCorkle and Nancy as his bewildered cellmates watched him pacing back and forth talking to no one.

“That fucker’s crazy,” Krantz quietly said to Zim and Miller.

“Yeah. Must be batshit. I really couldn’t see him as a murderer before, but now...” Miller’s response trailed off as

he stood there staring at Tom who was having quite an animated, one-sided conversation.

“Shut up you idiots!” Zim hissed. “Sit down and keep your mouths shut! No telling what this lunatic is capable of. Let’s just pretend we ain’t seeing nothing.” He casually went to his bunk and laid down on it, not taking his eyes off Tom as he continued pacing and talking to himself; Miller and Krantz followed suit and none of them said another word to Tom.

CHAPTER 23

Art and his partner arrived at Detective Young's office just as Chief Creighton was on his way out. They were just in time to hear Creighton say, "If you're not going to investigate the van, I will. And I'll go right to the prosecutor with whatever I can find. You haven't seen the last of me, Young. Tom Hopkins is not guilty and I'm going to find a way to prove it!"

Creighton stalked past the two detectives and nodded at them as he passed; his face was set in a stern expression. Art and Michaels exchanged a glance before Detective Young looked up and noticed them outside the door. Young stood up and asked if he could help them and as they came through the door, Michaels introduced himself and then Art. Young's look of chagrin was brief before his face went stoic and he invited them to take a seat, but his expression didn't go unmissed by Art and Michaels.

"Uh, sorry, Detective," Art said. "But where's the john? Long ride, you know?" Michaels gave him a look because they'd just stopped off to use the bathroom when they'd first entered the building. He didn't know what Art was up to, but Art gave him a meaningful glance that told him to go with it and he nodded to his partner in acknowledgement as Young instructed Art where to go.

After Art walked away, Michaels took a seat in one of the two chairs in front of Young's desk. Young crossed behind the desk and sat down again before asking, "Now what can I help you with Detective Michaels?"

Michaels began to explain, in more detail than what he'd provide on the telephone, why they'd come to see Young. He briefly described the string of murders in the city that they'd come to believe were the work of one killer and the two men began to discuss the Nancy Wilcox case Young was currently investigating.

As his partner talked with Detective Young, Art quickly went back in the direction from which they'd come

searching for the man who'd just left Young's office. He wanted to know who the man was, and how he was connected to Tom Hopkins and the Nancy Wilcox case. He caught up with Chief Creighton just as Creighton was exiting the building.

"Excuse me, sir!" Art called as he, too, exited the building.

Creighton turned around, not knowing if Art was calling to him, but when he saw Art rushing down the steps in his direction, he stopped and waited for Art to reach him before asking, "Were you talking to me?"

"Yes," Art panted, somewhat out of breath. He held up a finger while he took a few deeps breaths trying to get his breathing under control, then he asked, "Do you mind if I talk to you for a few minutes? I couldn't help but overhear your comments to Detective Young back there, about Tom Hopkins?"

Creighton agreed to speak to him, and he and Art moved further away from the building and stopped on the sidewalk out front. Art introduced himself and the two men began to talk. At first, Chief Creighton was reluctant to provide too much information, but the more they talked, the more he provided. By the time they were done, Art was feeling even more intrigued with the prospect of interviewing Tom Hopkins.

"One last question," Art said before ending the conversation, "You said back there – to Detective Young – something about investigating a van?"

"Yes. Hopkins told us in his initial interviews that the dead girl, Nancy, told him her body had been transferred in a van to the location where her body was dumped. He says she gave him a description of the van and part of a license plate number. He says she told him there was another girl – a *live* girl – in the back of the van with her. Young is so convinced that Hopkins killed Nancy that he won't even *look* at the van as potential evidence."

"That's very interesting..." Art considered this information for a moment then asked, "Chief, any possibility you can hang around today? Be there when we meet with Hopkins?"

"Absolutely. Whatever I can do to help."

"Great! But can we keep this little meeting between us and not let on to Detective Young that we've talked?"

"That would probably be best – especially because he and I don't exactly see eye-to-eye," Creighton said.

With that settled, the two men exchanged phone numbers and before they parted ways, Art promised to let Creighton know what time to meet them at the jail. Then Art went back into the building and found his way back to Young's office. When he got there, Michaels was looking at pictures of Nancy Wilcox's body. He looked up when his partner came in.

"Looks like there's no doubt about it," Michaels said to Detective Young as Art slid into the chair beside him. Michaels handed the photos to Art as he continued, "Similar wounds; body cleaned and left naked; coroner's report says same cause of death. Detective Young, your victim is the work of the same killer."

Art looked over the photos and then the coroner's report and he was in agreement with his partner. Detective Young sat behind his desk looking at the other detectives with excitement – which Art found a bit disturbing – but he said nothing to Young.

"Well gentlemen, it looks like I might have your serial killer locked behind bars," Young said with a satisfied smile. "I suppose you'd like to interview him? I've already put in a call to his attorney who should be meeting us at the jail..." he looked at his watch, calculating, "...in about forty-five minutes. Until then, perhaps we could go grab some lunch?"

Before Michaels could respond, Art replied, "We've actually eaten already. Picked something up on our way out here," he lied. Michaels gave him a look but said nothing as Art went on, "Why don't you go get some lunch and we'll meet

you at the jail in say, an hour? There's something else we need to attend to."

"Oh. Okay. Sure." Young responded, somewhat disappointed. "I'll just meet you over there then," he said as he stood and came around the desk. Art and Michaels stood with him and allowed Young to escort them out of the office then out to the front entrance. They left Young and didn't speak until they were outside the building and almost to their car.

"What the hell are you up to, Art?" Michaels demanded as soon as they got into the parking lot.

"Get in the car and I'll tell you all about it while we go get some fast food. I'm starving!"

* * * *

Tom was still pacing his cell and seemingly talking to himself when a guard came in and told him his attorney was there to see him. It had been quite a day for visitors so far – especially if he included the spirits of Mr. McCorkle and Nancy Wilcox – which Tom did. First Jenny, then Chief Creighton, then Andrew McCorkle and Nancy Wilcox, and now his attorney. Apparently, when Jenny was there this morning and told Tom she was going to help him, she'd really meant it. As Tom was escorted from the cell, his cellmates ended their silence and suddenly they were abuzz with conversation and speculation regarding the sanity of Tom Hopkins.

Tom was led to a different visiting room this time – a larger room with a longer table and several chairs – where his attorney sat waiting. The two men shook hands and Tom sat down as his attorney said, "I still haven't received word of your arraignment Tom, but I got a call from Detective Young this morning wanting to meet with us. I came in a bit early so that you and I could talk before he gets here."

"Okay."

"Also, Chief Creighton is outside. He tells me that Young is bringing two city detectives with him as well. Chief

Creighton wants to know if it's okay with you if he sits in on the interview as well."

"Uh... yes. I guess that's okay. But why is Young bringing detectives from the city?"

"That, I don't know. Sorry. I guess we'll have to wait and find out."

"Okay."

"Now, during the interview you should cooperate as best you can with the detectives but, if at any point I feel that your defense may be compromised in any way by the line of questioning, I'll interject and put a halt to the interview, understood?"

"Understood."

"Great. Is there anything else you'd like to discuss with me before the detectives arrive?"

Tom told him there was and asked him to explain the process for arraignment. Tom thought the arraignment was supposed to take place within a few days of his arrest, but since they hadn't received a date and time yet, what did that mean? Should he be worried? Could his attorney contact someone and find out when it was going to be? He really didn't want to stay in jail any longer and he wanted to be arraigned as soon as possible so he could try to get out on bail.

His attorney agreed to contact the prosecutor as soon as they were finished with the interview with the detectives. He told Tom he would find out what the hold-up was and try to get the date for the arraignment. He also promised to discuss the possibility of bail with the prosecutor when he spoke to him today. Satisfied, Tom said there was nothing else he wanted to discuss with him right now and asked if Chief Creighton could come in. His attorney waved to the guard on the other side of the window and the guard opened the door and stuck his head into the room. Tom's attorney instructed the man to bring Chief Creighton back and the man nodded before closing the door and talking into the mic attached at his shoulder. After a few moments, Chief Creighton came into

view on the other side of the glass and the guard opened the door and let him inside.

"Tom," Creighton said by way of greeting, "Thank you for agreeing to let me sit in on your interview."

"Chief Creighton, Nancy Wilcox is here," Tom blurted as soon as Creighton had taken a seat. "And Andrew McCorkle – they're both here."

"What?" Creighton said, flabbergasted as he instinctively looked around the room and saw no one but the three of them. "Nancy Wilcox and Andy McCorkle, you say? They're here right now? In this room with us?" Tom's lawyer surreptitiously looked around as Creighton spoke.

"Yes," Tom confirmed.

"Then I'd say they're just in time for a very interesting meeting!" Creighton mused.

* * * *

As they sat in the parking lot of a burger joint eating fast food, Art filled his partner in on his conversation with Chief Creighton. His mouth full, Michaels' face registered his reaction as Art told him what Creighton had said about having seen Hopkins earlier that day and Hopkins having convinced him that he really could communicate with spirits. Michaels swallowed and took a long draw on his soda before responding.

"Holy crap! Now I really can't wait to talk to this Hopkins guy! Wait 'til I tell my wife! She's never going to believe this!"

"I still don't know if I believe it," Art said. "But after what Jenny told me – and now Creighton – well, let's just say it's kinda hard not to be intrigued."

"I, for one, can't wait to be convinced that Hopkins is on the level. Imagine what kind of resource a guy like that could be," Michaels said with awe. "Someone like that could make our jobs a helluva lot easier!"

"Let's not get ahead of ourselves, partner. Let's try to go into this with some healthy skepticism – which I, for one, still have. Hopkins is going to have to be *really* convincing if he wants to make a believer out of me."

They hurriedly finished eating and threw away their trash before heading to meet Young at the jail. They both knew this interview could potentially be the big break they needed to catch their serial killer and they also knew they couldn't rule Hopkins out as a suspect based on hearsay; they'd have to evaluate Hopkins and the information he might provide with level heads. On the way to the jail, they discussed how they would handle the interview and decided Michaels would take the lead and Art would sit back and observe; a lot hinged on this interview and they needed to get it right.

"The only problem might be Detective Young," Michaels commented. "That guy seems like a real ass. And clearly, he's got Hopkins tried and convicted already. You should've seen how cocky and smug he was when he was telling me about arresting Hopkins. I'm not surprised he isn't investigating anything that Hopkins told him – he's too sure he's already got the killer."

"We'll have to handle him with care – tread lightly so we don't step on his toes," Art said as they pulled into the parking lot of the jail and Michaels negotiated into a parking spot.

"Probably be best if we keep things close to the vest while we're in there, not let on what we're thinking or what kinds of conclusions we might be drawing, eh?" Michaels suggested and Art agreed. They got out of the car and walked to the front entrance where they found Detective Young waiting for them just inside.

"Right this way, detectives," Young said as if he were a hostess in a restaurant. They followed him and stood by as Young talked to the officer at the front desk, then they all bypassed the metal detector and Young led them down a hallway explaining that he'd instructed Hopkins and his attorney be put

into the large interview room and they were there waiting for them now.

As they approached the interview room, Young let out an angry huff when he saw Chief Creighton in the room with Hopkins and his attorney and muttered, "What the hell is he doing in there?"

Art had explained to his partner that he'd asked Chief Creighton to be there, but he'd also asked Creighton not to let on to Young that they'd talked, so he and Michaels remained silent as Young began swearing under his breath. When the guard opened the door to admit them into the interview room, Young stopped the other two detectives in the hall and stepped inside the room.

"Creighton, a word please," Young said and Creighton excused himself and got up. He followed Young out into the hallway where he could see Art and Michaels waiting. Once outside after the door was closed again, Young demanded, "What are you doing here, Creighton? You're not part of this investigation."

Creighton briefly glanced at the other two detectives then back at Young and lied, "Mr. Hopkins has asked me to be here."

Young gave an annoyed grunt and told him, "Alright, but you keep your mouth shut and let us do the talking, you understand?"

"I understand, detective."

Young opened the door and they all filed in. After introduction had been made, the men took seats – Young and the other two detectives on one side of the table, Creighton, Tom, and Tom's attorney on the other side.

Art looked the suspect over; he appeared to be in his forties and, even seated, Art could tell Hopkins was tall; he was also very lean. Could this guy possibly be the man who killed all those young women? Art didn't think he looked like a killer, but he knew looks could be very deceiving. He scrutinized Hopkins' brown eyes, trying to see if he could detect anything

there, but he only saw fear and mistrust. Were these the eyes of a serial killer? Art had never met a serial killer in person, but he had seen pictures and all the serial killers he'd ever seen pictures of had something about their eyes that looked cold and detached; somehow vacant of any emotion. Tom Hopkins' eyes were filled with emotion. Art's first instinct upon seeing Hopkins was to think Hopkins wasn't their man, but he decided he'd better reserve any judgment until he found out more about the suspect.

Once everyone was settled around the table, Michaels pulled a digital recorder from his pocket and asked if anyone objected to him recording the interview, when no one voiced any objection, he switched on the recorder and placed it in the middle of the table. He stated the date and the time and listed each person present for the interview before he began.

"Mr. Hopkins," Michaels began, "My partner and I are investigating a string of murders that are similar in nature to the murder of Nancy Wilcox here in Smith Falls. Now at this time, we don't consider you a suspect in any of those murders, but because of the similarities, we'd like to ask you some questions. Is that alright with you?" He looked first at Hopkins' attorney, who nodded assent, then at Tom.

You've got this Tom. We're here with you, Tom heard Mr. McCorkle encouraging him.

Yes. We're here, Tom, Nancy said. *Tell them about the other girl,* she urged.

"Yes." Tom replied, relieved that Nancy and Mr. McCorkle were still with him.

"Good. Okay, now I understand you came forward voluntarily to provide information to police regarding the murder of Nancy Wilcox, is that correct?"

"Yes. That's correct."

"And can you please walk me through that? Tell me how you came to have this information that you brought to police?"

And so Tom began to explain, first how he'd come to

have the ability to hear the dead, and then everything that had happened the day of Nancy's burial service. He told them how he'd taken notes of everything Nancy had told him so that he would get it right when he went to the police (at this point Tom's attorney pulled out his copy of Tom's notes and handed them to Michaels who glanced at them and handed them to Art). Tom explained that he'd gone to the police station in Bright Creek, which is where he lives, and he'd passed on the information Nancy had given him to Chief Creighton and then he'd been asked to wait. He then explained how his waiting had turned into him being detained and held in a cell in Bright Creek until he was ultimately arrested and brought here to Smith Falls.

"Chief Creighton and Detective Young didn't believe me when I told them I'd gotten the information from Nancy's spirit. They thought I was lying and that I was somehow involved in Nancy's disappearance – and murder – but I wasn't lying and I'm not involved!" Tom asserted. "I didn't kill anybody!"

"Okay, okay, take it easy Mr. Hopkins. We're just trying to get to the bottom of things here. I'm not accusing you of anything, okay?"

Tom tried to rein in his emotions. "Okay. I'm sorry," he apologized.

"If I could just interject?" Chief Creighton asked and received an irritated stare from Young.

"I told you," Young huffed, "You're not a part of this investigation and..."

"Hold up there, Detective Young," Michaels interrupted. "Let Chief Creighton talk, please." Young bit his tongue, fuming, but nodded in acquiescence and Michaels said, "Go ahead, Chief."

"I just wanted to say that I have since changed my mind about Tom's ability to talk to spirits based on evidence that he has provided to me that convinced me he does indeed have that ability." Art and Michaels exchanged a meaningful

look while Young continued to fume and Creighton went on, "And I think I should tell you that Tom has told me that the spirit of Nancy Wilcox is here with us today, isn't that right Tom?"

Creighton looked over at Tom and Tom nodded saying, "Yes. That's right. Nancy is here with us now."

Michaels looked at Art, eyebrows raised, and Art could tell his partner was tremendously excited by this revelation. Art lifted a hand to his partner, indicating that he should tone it down, then he turned to Tom and took over.

"I'm sure you'll understand our skepticism, Mr. Hopkins, but this is a first for me and my partner." Tom nodded, resigned to the fact that they weren't going to believe him, but ready to try to convince them nonetheless. "So..." Art said as he looked over Tom's notes, "It says here in your notes something about a van? What can you – or Nancy, if she's here – tell us about that?"

"Oh come on!" Young exclaimed. "You can't serious believe this bullshit! The guy is either batshit crazy or he's lying!"

"Calm down Detective Young!" Michaels snapped. "We'd like to hear what Mr. Hopkins has to say. Whether you think he's lying or not is irrelevant to this interview. Please allow us to draw our own conclusions *after* we've heard what he has to say."

Young was growing angrier by the second. "This is *my* jail and *my* suspect and *I'll* be the one who says how this interview is conducted, you got that? You can't come in here and tell me how this interview is going to go!"

"Detective Young," Art placated, "We're not trying to interfere with your investigation, but we're conducting an investigation of our own. We simply ask that you allow us to question Mr. Hopkins how we see fit. If that's a problem for you, we can stop the interview right now, but I don't think you want to interfere with our investigation, either – do you?"

Young pushed back his chair and stood up. "You two,

outside. Now!" he commanded.

"Interview being suspended at the request of Detective Young at..." Michaels said into the digital recorder, giving the time and pressing the stop button. He pocketed the recorder and stood up, raising an eyebrow at his partner as Art stood up too.

The three detectives left the room, closing the door behind them. Tom and the two men flanking him could see the detectives on the other side of the glass arguing, their words muffled. Young's face was red and he looked furious; it was obvious that the other two detectives were trying to keep a calm demeanor and their voices low. Art looked through the window at the three men waiting there before he and Michaels turned and walked away.

"What's going on?" Tom asked. "Are they leaving?"

"It looks that way," Creighton said as Young opened the door and stepped back into the room.

"This interview is over," Young barked before slamming the door and stalking off down the hall and out of sight.

"B-b-but..." Tom stammered.

"Don't you worry, Tom. I'll catch up to Michaels and Hauxwell. This isn't over, I promise," Creighton said before getting up and rushing out of the room.

Tom sat there bewildered as his attorney pushed back his chair and gathered his things saying, "I'm going to go see the prosecutor, see if I can talk to him about bail. And believe me, he's going to hear about this interview, too." He stood up and Tom stood with him. They shook hands and the attorney went to the door. "I'll come back later and tell you what I find out," he said before leaving.

Don't worry Tom, Mr. McCorkle said. We've got your back. We'll be around whenever you need us.

"Thanks Mr. McCorkle," Tom whispered as the guard at the door came inside to take him back to his cell.

After leaving the interview, Art and Michaels got into their car and began discussing their next move. They saw Young come out of the building and he was obviously still pissed off. He strutted down the sidewalk and passed by them on his way through the parking lot before getting into his own car and driving off. Art's phone rang; it was Jenny. She wanted to know if her uncle had talked to Tom Hopkins yet. As Art explained to his niece what had just happened, and assured her that he would soon be talking with Tom again, Michaels received a call of his own. After listening to the man on the other end, Michaels thanked him and told him he would be in touch soon, then hung up and got his partner's attention.

"I'm sorry, Jen. I've gotta go. I'll call you later, okay?" Art hung up the phone and asked, "What is it?"

"That was one of the detectives from the fourth precinct. They found another victim. Medical examiner says she was killed less than two days ago. Same as the rest, no viable evidence yet. It looks like Hopkins is definitely not our guy."

As the two men sat discussing this latest development in their case, they saw Chief Creighton exit the building that housed the jail and he stood scanning the parking lot. Art climbed out of the car and waved to him and Creighton headed their way. When he reached their car, Art told him to get in and the three men headed for the nearest diner where they got coffee and Michaels filled Creighton in on the latest murder victim that had been found. It was clear that Tom Hopkins could not possibly have been involved and they all agreed they needed to go back and talk to Tom again.

* * *

Young held the receiver away from his ear as the prosecutor shouted, "What the fuck, Young? I told you to cut

Hopkins loose! Why am I finding out he's still in jail?"

"Shit," Young muttered under his breath as he scrambled to come up with something to tell the prosecutor. He stumbled through some lame excuse before the prosecutor told him in no uncertain terms that he had better make sure Hopkins was out within the hour if he knew what was good for him and then the prosecutor hung up on him.

Still pissed off at the detectives from the city, now Young was equally pissed off at Hopkins' attorney for having gone to see the prosecutor. *Stupid lawyers!* Young thought. Not only was he in hot water with the prosecutor for still having Hopkins locked up, but the prosecutor had also reamed his ass for the way he'd handled the interview at the jail. *Fuck!* He thought angrily as he slammed down the receiver. He got up from his desk and hurried out to get the ball rolling for Hopkins' release.

"Just my fucking luck," he groused as he walked quickly down the corridor. Young knew his case against Hopkins was completely blown now; if he couldn't keep Hopkins in jail, those detectives from the city would get their hands on him and leave Young out in the cold with no credit for having caught their serial killer. "God dammit!" he exclaimed vehemently, then with less steam he whined, "It's not fucking fair!"

* * * *

When Tom got back to his cell, he dejectedly sat down on his bunk and was silent. He was so lost in his thoughts that he hadn't noticed that as he'd entered the cell his cellmates had gone silent, too. They stood looking at him warily, trying to gauge his state of mind and unsure whether he was a danger to them or not. Finally, Zim quietly spoke.

"You okay Hopkins?"

Tom looked up at him as if he'd been completely unaware anyone else was in the cell with him. "Huh?"

"Everything alright, buddy?" Zim asked.

"You wouldn't believe me if I told you," Tom said sadly.

"Come on, buddy. You can talk to us, right guys?" Zim said and the others nodded.

"Yeah, sure. You can talk to us," Miller agreed.

Krantz remained silent and none of them moved any closer to Tom. Tom looked up at them with doleful eyes, considering. Should he trust them? Would they believe him? Did it matter? These men he'd been locked in this cell with for the past few days were the closest thing he'd ever had to brothers, or friends, so Tom began to tell them his story. At first, they kept their distance and remained quiet as he talked, but after a while they began to relax and move closer; they began to ask questions.

"Holy shit!" Miller said with amazement when Tom had finished his tale. "Holy fucking shit! *That* is fucking incredible!"

"You mean you don't think I'm lying?" Tom asked him.

"Brother, even if you *are* lying – that is one fucking incredible story! Isn't it guys?" Miller said and looked at the others who agreed with his assessment.

"It is a pretty amazing story," Zim agreed. "Is it the truth?"

"Yes. It's the truth," Tom said flatly, having known they wouldn't believe him either.

"If you say it's true, then I believe you," Zim declared.

Surprised, Tom brightened and asked, "You do?"

"Absolutely. No reason you'd want to lie to us. We're your comrades, right? Holy shit is right, Miller! He was talking to ghosts!" He sat down, relieved and told Tom, "We thought you had completely lost your marbles earlier, the way you were pacing back and forth talking to yourself!"

Tom chuckled at the thought of what he must have looked like to them when Mr. McCorkle and Nancy had shown

up in their cell. The more he thought about it, the louder he laughed, and they all joined in with him. He heard Mr. McCorkle and Nancy laughing too.

“We thought you were one crazy fucker,” Krantz added and they all laughed harder. For the first time in his life, Tom felt like he had friends – and it felt good. He still didn’t know what was going to happen to him, but at least he didn’t feel alone.

Their laughter was interrupted by the rumbling of the cell door being opened. The four cellmates turned toward the door and their laughter faded.

“Time to go Hopkins,” the guard announced.

“What? Go where?” Tom asked, confused. Was there someone else to see him today? He wouldn’t have been surprised after all the visitors he’d had today.

“You’re getting out of here,” the guard replied. When Tom just stood there looking at him he clarified, “You’re being *released* Hopkins. Now come on, don’t take all day.”

“But...”

“Just go, man!” Zim said.

“Yeah, get out while the getting’s good!” Miller advised.

“Get the fuck out you crazy bastard,” Krantz said and gave Tom a smirk.

“Yeah. Okay. Thanks guys,” Tom said as he turned to go. But before he made it to the door, he turned back and stuck out his hand. Each of his cellmates shook it in turn and wished him well, then Tom turned around and walked out of the cell, soon to be a free man.

After being given his clothes and personal belongings, Tom quickly changed his clothes and was processed out. When he walked out the door to freedom, he found his attorney waiting there for him.

“The charges have been dropped, Tom. It seems they didn’t have enough evidence and the prosecutor has decided not to hold you any longer. Congratulations,” his attorney said

and shook his hand. Tom was at once shocked and elated with the news. Relief washed over him like a cool shower after a hot day. He smiled, knowing he would soon be home.

“Thank you for everything,” Tom said. “I appreciate all that you’ve done for me.”

“All part of the job,” his attorney said and smiled. “How about I give you a lift back to Bright Creek?”

* * * *

Art, Michaels, and Creighton arrived at the jail just after Tom and his attorney had pulled out of the parking lot headed for Bright Creek. They went inside and asked to see Tom Hopkins.

“He’s been released. Left a few minutes ago with his lawyer,” the desk officer informed them and turned away before they could ask any more questions.

The three men looked at one another and Creighton shrugged, “That’s good news, right?”

“Yes. It’s good news for Hopkins,” Art agreed, “But we still want to talk to him.”

“He’s probably on his way back to Bright Creek,” Creighton said. “You could talk to him there, I’m sure. I know he wants to help find Nancy’s killer.”

“I guess that’s what we’ll have to do then. You up for a drive to Bright Creek, Michaels?”

“Hell yes. I’m sure my wife will understand if I get home late.” He winked at his partner and said, “Let’s go.”

“Would you gentlemen mind if I came along with you when you talk to Tom?” Creighton asked. “I’d kinda like to sit in on that if I could.”

“I don’t see why not,” Art answered. “Maybe we can follow you and you can get us to his house?”

After agreeing that Creighton would lead them to Bright Creek and to Tom’s house, the three men left the jail and went to their respective cars. The two cars pulled out and

drove toward Route 90 and Bright Creek. While Michaels put in a call to his wife, excited to tell her they were on their way to talk to a supposed spirit medium and he would be late getting home, Art called Jenny to let her know that Hopkins had been released and that he and his partner were on their way to Bright Creek to see if Hopkins would talk to them. As Art knew she would be, Jenny was relieved to hear her friend had been released. Art told her he would call her again later when he had more time to talk, then hung up the phone and shoved it into his pocket. He sat back and watched the scenery go by, anxious to get to Bright Creek and interview Tom Hopkins.

* * * *

Tom had his attorney drop him off at his mother's house. He knew she was worrying about him being in jail and he wanted to let her know he'd been released; he hadn't thought to try to call her from Smith Falls as he'd been too eager to get home after they'd let him out. After again thanking his attorney, Tom got out of the car and walked around to the back of his mother's house. As he walked up the back steps his mother saw him from the kitchen window and came running to the door.

"Tom!" she cried happily as she opened the door and ran out to meet him, "You're out of jail!" She threw her arms around him and hugged him tight insisting he tell her what had happened; why they'd let him go; was he hungry? Tom laughed and squeezed her to him before letting her go and answering all of her questions as they walked inside. After he supplied enough answers to satisfy her, his mother instructed him to sit while she made him something to eat so Tom sat down at the kitchen table and allowed his mother to fuss over him.

Mrs. Connor made Tom a sandwich fit for Dagwood Bumstead and popped open a beer and set it on the table in front of his plate before opening another beer for herself and

sitting down at the table to watch her son eat. As he ate the big sandwich, Tom's mother told him about Jenny's visits and how the two of them had gone to the cemetery and tried to talk to Andrew McCorkle on his behalf. She was gratified when Tom told her their plan had worked and that the spirits of Mr. McCorkle and Nancy Wilcox had gone to the jail in Smith Falls to help him even though Tom hadn't had a chance to use their assistance. Tom told her about the day's events and the interview that had been cut short by Detective Young. While he was happy that he'd been released from jail, Tom felt he'd not yet been able to help Nancy and he feared she wouldn't move on until he was able to convince someone to follow up on the information she'd given him regarding her killer.

After discussing it further while he finished off his sandwich and beer, Tom and his mother agreed that first thing tomorrow they would contact Chief Creighton and speak to him again – although not in person and *not* at the police station because Tom had soured on trying to be a good citizen after his recent experiences – but they both felt as though Chief Creighton now believed in Tom's ability and they thought maybe now he would be more willing to hear what Nancy had to say.

After Tom finished eating, he told his mother he wanted to go home. When she offered to drive him there, he declined, saying that after having been pent up in jail for so long he wanted to walk the few blocks to his cottage and enjoy the outdoors. She agreed the exercise would do him good, but she insisted on driving over to his cottage to make sure the police hadn't left the place in a shambles after their search. The last thing he needed, she said, was to get home to a big mess. She took his keys and told him she would go on ahead of him and tidy things up. Tom thought about trying to talk her out of it, but he knew how much she wanted to take care of him, so he said nothing and allowed her to go.

As he walked along the street he'd grown up on, Tom felt lucky to be out of jail and to no longer be a murder suspect.

The past few days seemed like a bad dream. While he'd been used to people not believing he could speak with spirits, he'd never imagined his gift would have landed him in jail. He hadn't even considered the possibility that the information Nancy had given him was information that would make him appear to be a suspect in her disappearance and murder; he'd been so naïve. While he still felt compelled to help Nancy, he decided he must be more careful in the future. Chief Creighton now seemed to believe he'd been telling the truth, but Tom knew he had to be careful whom he trusted from now on.

When Tom drew near the cemetery, there was a sudden flurry of voices as the spirits in the cemetery heralded his arrival. It seemed word of the reason for Tom's absence from home had spread among the residents of Oak Lawn and they all wanted to welcome him back and to give him words of encouragement. Tom acknowledged their kindness and thanked them for their concern as he walked up the driveway to his cottage. His mother's car was parked in front of the house and the front door was open. As the welcoming voices settled down and diminished, Tom could hear his mother humming as she tidied up the cottage and it made him smile.

Coming through the front door, Tom was greeted by the aroma of brownies baking in the oven. His mother had been here only a few minutes, yet she'd already whipped up brownie batter. She looked up as he came in and grinned with pleasure when he told her how wonderful the cottage smelled. Mrs. Connor ushered Tom to his recliner and handed him the remote telling him to relax and get comfortable while she finished cleaning up and then she would get out of his hair and go home, but Tom told her he didn't feel like being alone just yet and asked her if she would stay. She agreed, of course, because there was nothing his mother liked better than to feel she was needed.

A short time later, Tom and his mother sat eating brownies and watching television when there was a knock at the door. Tom started to get up but his mother stopped him

saying he should stay just where he was and let her answer the door, so Tom leaned back in his chair again and took another bite of his brownie, but when he heard the voices of men speaking to his mother he got up to see who was at the door.

"Why don't you leave him alone for tonight?" Mrs. Connor was saying as Tom came into sight of the door. He could see Chief Creighton and the two detectives from the city. "Tom and I will call you tomorrow, Chief," his mother said decisively.

"We're so sorry to bother you Mrs. Hopkins..." one of the detectives said before being interrupted.

"My name is Connor," Tom's mother corrected him.

"I'm sorry, Mrs. Connor," the detective corrected himself, "But we'd really appreciate it if we could talk to your son. We've come a long way, you see..." As Tom drew closer to the door he could see it was Detective Hauxwell speaking to his mother.

"It's okay, mom," Tom said as he came up behind her. "Please come in gentlemen," he said and opened the screen door for them to enter as his mother gave him an irritated *harumph* and moved out of the way.

Tom led the three men into the kitchen and the four of them sat down around the table. There were only four chairs, so his mother leaned against the kitchen counter, her arms crossed defensively in front of her. She stood scowling at the policemen as Tom asked them why they were there, making it clear that she wasn't happy that they were there.

"Tom," Chief Creighton began. "I agreed to bring Detective Hauxwell and Detective Michaels to see you because they'd like your help in their investigation."

"Why should my son help these detectives after you arrested him when he tried to help *you*?" Tom's mother demanded crossly.

"Mom, please..." Tom said as he looked over his shoulder at his mother who was glaring at Creighton. "Chief Creighton," he said as he turned back to the table, "I think you

can understand my mother's concern – I'm concerned as well. I'm barely home from jail and you're wanting me to trust you after you arrested me? How do I know these detectives..." he made eye contact with each man in turn, "...aren't going to arrest me as well?"

"Tom – if I may call you Tom?" Art Hauxwell said and Tom nodded his consent, "We understand your concern but if you'll please just hear us out, perhaps you'll be more open to helping us."

Tom turned to look at his mother and after receiving her nod of approval, he turned back to Hauxwell and said, "Okay, I'm listening."

"Thank you Tom," he said before looking to Tom's mother and adding, "And Mrs. Connor." She nodded and he went on, "We didn't have the opportunity to get very far earlier, so let me begin by explaining our interest in the information you have. We're investigating a series of murders which we believe were perpetrated by the same individual over at least the past two years. Each murder is similar in nature to the murder of Nancy Wilcox and all of the victims have been young women who were first abducted, then raped, tortured, and ultimately murdered." Mrs. Connor gasped and her expression changed from crossness to horror.

"Mom, maybe you should go into the other room while we talk?" Tom suggested as he looked back at his mother with concern.

"No. I'm okay," Mrs. Connor assured him. "Go on, detective."

"Yes ma'am. As I was saying, we believe all of these women were killed by the same man but we have very little evidence to help us track him down and that's why we need your help. Chief Creighton here tells us that you have information that you claim you received from the, um, *ghost* of Nancy Wilcox and we're very much interested in what you might be able to tell us about her murder."

Please tell them Tom! Please tell them about that other girl! Tom

stiffened slightly as Nancy made her presence known. He didn't know if he should tell these detectives anything and Nancy being there in that moment was putting him between a rock and a hard place. For all he knew, these detectives might arrest him if he said anything at all and he wasn't willing to take that chance.

"I'd like to help you gentlemen, but I've just spent the past few days in jail for a crime I had nothing to do with and I don't want to go back," Tom told them.

"We understand that, Tom, but we aren't here to arrest you – we're here to ask for your help," Hauxwell said.

"Besides," Michaels interjected, "We don't believe you had anything to do with the murders because the latest victim that was found was killed while you were in jail – so you see? You're not a suspect in our investigation."

"That's right," Hauxwell confirmed.

Nancy Wilcox began to weep then. *We're too late!* she sobbed. *We didn't save her!*

Tom's stomach dropped at the realization that Nancy was right. He'd been unsuccessful in stopping the killer from killing again. "I'm sorry, Nancy," Tom whispered.

Tom's whisper didn't go unnoticed by the three other men at the table who exchanged glances before Creighton asked, "Tom, is Nancy here with us?"

Tom looked at him, considering whether he should answer, before responding, "I'm sorry gentlemen, but I don't think I want to continue this conversation. I know you *say* I'm not a suspect in your investigation, but I don't want to take the chance of becoming one, either."

"But..." Michaels began before Tom pushed away from the table and stood, signaling the end of their conversation.

"Wait Tom, please. If you could just give me a moment to make a quick telephone call, maybe I can convince you that we're here to help you... and help Nancy," Hauxwell said and stood up as well. "Please, just give me a moment." He pulled

out his cell phone and stepped into the next room. A few minutes later, he came back into the kitchen and handed Tom the phone, "I have someone who wants to talk to you."

Confused, Tom took the proffered phone and placed it to his ear saying, "Hello?"

"Tom, it's me, Jenny Singleton."

"Jenny? But I don't understand..." Tom said, even more confused now.

"Listen to me, Tom. Remember when I told you earlier that I was going to help you?"

"Yes, but..."

"Detective Hauxwell is my uncle, Tom. I called him and asked for his help to get you out of jail. I told him you didn't kill Nancy. Please talk to him Tom, he'll believe you!" Jenny pleaded. "He's promised me he'll investigate what Nancy told you. You have to trust me – you have to trust my uncle Art!"

Tom looked at Art Hauxwell who waited patiently as he talked to Jenny, considering what the girl was telling him, then he said into the phone, "Okay, Jenny. I will."

Relieved, Jenny responded, "Oh good! And don't worry! You can trust my uncle, I swear!"

CHAPTER 25

Twenty minutes later, Tom had sent his mother home and he, Detective Hauxwell, Detective Michaels, and Chief Creighton were sitting around his kitchen table and Tom was giving the detectives information straight from the spirit of Nancy Wilcox. Nancy wanted Tom to ask them about the latest victim that had been found and so he did. She wanted to know what the girl looked like; she wanted to know if it was the girl that had been in the van with her and her body. The detectives explained that they'd only received the call about the latest victim being found earlier that afternoon and they hadn't been given details of the girl's physical description, so Nancy, through Tom, began to give them a description of the girl who'd been bound and unconscious in the back of the van that had been used to dump her body.

Detective Michaels took notes of the description as Tom relayed it to them and then he stepped outside to place a call to see if the descriptions matched. Then Tom and Detective Hauxwell began discussing the van that had been used to transport Nancy's body.

"And the van, can Nancy give you any details on it? Color, make, model? Anything that would help us to track it down?" Hauxwell asked.

"Nancy says it was definitely a white van," Tom said as Nancy described the van to him. "She says it was a big van – not like a passenger mini-van – and was wide open in back, no seats. She says her killer put her body, wrapped in plastic, into the van and the other girl was already in there. She says the other girl was alive, but she was unconscious, and they both fit in the back of the van with plenty of room to spare. She says to tell you there were also some boxes and other stuff in the back of the van with them."

Detective Hauxwell scribbled furiously on a notepad as Tom spoke, stopping him periodically to ask a clarifying question then scribbling some more. Tom started to relax

somewhat as Hauxwell seemed to take everything he said seriously and didn't act doubtful of the validity of what Tom was telling him. When Detective Michaels came back into the room, he quietly slid back into his chair so as not to interrupt and he and Chief Creighton sat silently observing as Tom continued relaying what Nancy was telling him.

"She says there was a rolling door on the passenger side and double doors at the rear of the van. There were windows in the back doors but not on the sides. Her killer rolled her body out of the plastic when he dumped her into the ditch. She says at that point she stayed with her body and watched as the van drove away. It was dark when she was dumped and the license plate on the van was partially obscured but she thinks she saw a number one and the letter B on the license plate."

"And what about any kind of lettering or signage on the van? Was there anything written on it?"

"She says no. She didn't see any writing on the van. It was just plain white."

"Great! Tell Nancy that's very helpful," Hauxwell said.

"She says to tell you that she can hear you, even though she knows you can't hear her," Tom explained.

"Oh, okay. Sorry Nancy," Hauxwell said and, feeling someone embarrassed, looked around the room. "Uh...this is my first, um, experience of this kind," he apologized. "Now what about your killer? What can you tell me about him, Nancy?"

Tom listened briefly then relayed, "She says her killer was definitely a man, but he kept her blindfolded most of the time before he killed her so she never saw his face. The night he dumped her body, he was wearing a hoodie and it hid his face and hair – but she says he was a white man about your height, but bulkier than you."

"What about when he killed her? She didn't see him then, either? I mean, when she...at least I assume she would have left her body when she died, right? It stands to reason

that even if she'd been blindfolded when he killed her, she would have been able to see him once she was out of her body?"

The fact that Hauxwell was even asking this question gave Tom hope that the man actually believed Nancy was there speaking through him. He tilted his head, listening, as Nancy replied to the detective's question.

"She says she's sorry," Tom said after a few moments. "But she didn't see him then either. She says he cut her thigh and when she started to bleed, he left her there to die alone. She says when she found herself leaving her body she was pretty freaked out and didn't know what was happening to her but she knew she was alone in the room. She says that later, when he came back and cleaned her body and wrapped her in plastic, he was dressed in a coverall, like you see on TV when they send in forensic investigators, she says. He was also wearing a mask, so she wasn't able see what he looked like."

"I see," Hauxwell said, "That sounds consistent with the lack of evidence recovered from the bodies. The guy knows what he's doing. I think we have enough of a description of the van to give us something to work with though. You've done a really good job, Nancy – and Tom – thank you for your help."

When Hauxwell finished with his questions, Michaels informed them that the latest victim did match the physical description Tom had relayed to them a few minutes earlier and Tom heard Nancy begin to weep again.

* * * *

After thanking Tom for his help, Art and his partner left Tom's cottage and drove out of Bright Creek. They discussed how best to handle the situation given that the information they now had was given to them through such an unorthodox method and they decided the only way they could explain it was with the truth – however, they agreed they would

keep their “psychic source” anonymous so as not to bring unwanted attention to Tom’s door. Art was driving while Michaels was on the phone relaying information regarding the van so they could get started looking for it. As they’d both expected, the officer on the other end gave Michaels a good ribbing when he asked Michaels how they had come by this information about the van – but he knew as well as they did that they were getting desperate for clues in this case, so he finally agreed to run the information through the system and see if he could find any vans matching the description.

Art had promised his niece he was going to give Tom Hopkins the benefit of the doubt, and he hoped he wasn’t going to regret it. Chief Creighton had filled them in on Tom’s background, and Art was in agreement that Hopkins didn’t seem a likely suspect in Nancy Wilcox’s murder – plus they knew Hopkins was in jail when the latest victim had been killed – so he was fairly confident Hopkins wasn’t their killer. But he wasn’t one hundred percent convinced that Hopkins wasn’t somehow involved. Jenny had said she was *sure* Tom Hopkins wasn’t involved and Art was trusting his niece’s judgment. He’d never before had an experience with anything as woo-woo and out there as someone talking with the spirit of a dead girl, but he was going to be doing some major research on it as soon as he got in front of a computer.

“Okay. Hopefully they’ll have something for us by the time we get back to the city,” Michaels said to Art when he hung up the phone.

“Let’s hope so,” Art responded. Then he said, “So, I gotta ask you – in your *expert* opinion – do you think Hopkins is really a psychic... I mean a *medium*? Do you believe he was actually talking to the ghost of Nancy Wilcox?”

“I’d like to believe he was for real. That stuff is fascinating! But if he isn’t, then he’s one hell of a good actor,” Michaels replied. “But I think I’ll reserve judgment until we see if this information he gave us pans out.”

“Let’s hope it does because if it doesn’t, we’re back to

square one.”

* * * *

Tom and Chief Creighton stood outside Tom’s house watching the two detectives as they drove out of the driveway and into the street. Tom hoped the information he and Nancy had given them would help them track down Nancy’s killer and he said as much to Chief Creighton.

“I hope so too, Tom,” Creighton responded. “And Tom, I owe you an apology. I’m sorry about everything you’ve been through these past few days – I’m sorry I didn’t believe you.”

“Thanks for that,” Tom said, “But I know what it must’ve sounded like to you – I know people in this town have their opinions about me – and it’s only natural that you wouldn’t believe I could communicate with spirits. I just wish I hadn’t sent Pete away after that first night, maybe then...” he trailed off and shrugged.

“Well I’ll tell you this much, I believe you now and if there’s ever anything you need from me, don’t hesitate to call, okay?”

“Yeah, thanks Chief. I appreciate that.”

Chief Creighton held out his hand to Tom and the two men shook, “I guess I’d better get on home now,” Creighton said, and he turned away and walked to his car.

As Creighton got into his car and started the engine, Tom turned and went back inside the house. Tomorrow would be a busy day; he’d been gone only a few days, but those few days had disrupted his routine and the cemetery needed his attention. He hoped he wouldn’t be losing his job because of the events of the past few days, but if he did, he planned to leave the cemetery in good shape when he left it.

When he went to bed that night, Tom was grateful to be home in his own bed again. Being in jail had been traumatic for him and he was relieved to be out of there and back inside

his comfortable cottage. He missed Rosalie so much more that night than he'd missed her in a long time. Not that he didn't *always* miss her, because he most definitely did, but on this night after coming home from jail he missed her especially. *Oh Rosalie!* Tom thought as he lay alone in the bed they'd shared. *How I wish I could turn back time and have you here with me now! I wish I could just talk to you one more time!* He'd had these thoughts a million times, at least, since he'd lost her and he felt so lonely for her that he began to cry, and all the stress and fear and anxieties from the past several days came pouring out with the tears he cried for Rosalie who was forever lost to him.

* * * *

Art had finally gotten home around midnight the night before. He and Michaels had gone back to the station after returning from Bright Creek and while Michaels had typed up a report of the events in Smith Falls that day, Art had typed a report on their interview with Tom Hopkins – identifying him only as an anonymous source. They both knew they were going to have quite a bit of explaining to do when the captain got wind of their story about having consulted a medium for information to help them with their case, but they hoped by the time it got around to the captain they would have a lead on the van used to dump Nancy Wilcox's body out in Smith Falls. Art hoped Hopkins hadn't been making the whole thing up.

During their interview with Tom Hopkins he'd told them that the spirit of Nancy Wilcox was speaking to him and that he was directly relaying to them what she was saying. If Hopkins was to be believed, then Nancy Wilcox herself had confirmed that she'd been abducted after she'd left a concert at Smith's Field. She'd told them she'd been separated from her friends at the concert and thought to find them at their car, but she'd never made it to the car and the next thing she'd known, she was waking up bound and blindfolded not knowing where she was.

Smith Field was located between Smith Falls and Bright Creek, where Nancy had lived, and her body was found in a ditch on the outskirts of Smith Falls. Art wondered if this meant her killer had purposely dumped her body in the same area from which he'd abducted her. He thought it was at least worth considering so he and Michaels began going through the files they had on each of the other victims to see if there was a correlation between where each woman had last been seen and the location at which each had been found. Since they didn't have a file on the most recent victim yet, they couldn't check on that one, but of the other five they had, they were able to determine that three of them had been dumped reasonably close to where they'd last been seen – and that seemed significant. If they could re-canvass those areas and ask if anyone had seen a white van matching the description they'd been given, then it might give the information they'd received from Hopkins regarding the van more credence.

It seemed they finally had something to follow up on, and with the promise of their investigation actually being able to get underway, Art and Michaels left the station feeling hopeful for a change. In the morning they would contact the other detectives they'd been conferring with and have them canvass the areas where their victims had been found to look for witnesses who might have seen a white van. With any luck, they'd have some possible matches for the van by then and they'd be able to check out those as well.

Art went to bed feeling an optimism he hadn't felt since this case began. He laid in bed thinking about Tom Hopkins and this supposed ability he had to speak with the dead. If it was for real, he wondered if Hopkins might be able to help with other cases. He'd heard of that kind of thing before – police and psychics working together to solve cases – and although he'd never personally known any detectives that had used a psychic, if the information Hopkins had given them helped with them with this case, Art decided he'd be more than willing to seek Hopkins' help on other cases. Perhaps

tomorrow he'd find out if Hopkins was for real.

* * * *

Early the next morning, as Tom was getting ready to head outside and get started with his work, the telephone rang. It was a member of the City Council; he said Chief Creighton had called him the night before to let him know Tom had been released from jail and all charges against him had been dropped. The councilman said he was calling Tom this morning to assure him that the Council had no plans to replace him and the Council hoped Tom wouldn't be leaving his position as caretaker at Oak Lawn because of the misunderstanding that had taken place. Relieved, Tom said he had no plans to leave his job and he was eager to get back to work. When the call ended, Tom was feeling much more secure and he was grateful he could get back to his work.

Only a few days had passed, but there were lots of things that needed to be done at the cemetery. Tom was glad he would be keeping busy. The previous night he'd cried himself to sleep but today he knew he needed to stop feeling sorry for himself and get on with his life; he needed to get back into his routine and not allow himself to wallow in his grief over his lost wife; he needed to put his experiences in jail behind him and move forward.

Although Tom was anxious to find out if the information Nancy had given them the night before would pan out, he knew it would take time for the detectives to investigate it. Another reason he wanted to throw himself into his work was so he could stop worrying about the investigation. He was worried that the information wouldn't pan out and if it didn't, it would make him look like a charlatan – or just a plain liar – and possibly a suspect again.

While he didn't typically care that people thought he was strange, Tom wanted – no, he *needed* – the detectives to believe in him. He wanted them to solve their case, then they'd

know he had nothing to do with Nancy's murder, or any of the other murders. He felt that last night they'd listened to him and they'd seemed to take him seriously, but if the information he'd given them didn't lead anywhere, he feared he'd once again become a suspect in the investigation. Tom needed to get his mind off things or he'd drive himself crazy with worry. He went to the shed and brought out the riding mower determined to stop worrying and start cutting the grass. He set about readying the mower and whistling to himself, happy to be back outside and free again.

It's nice to see you in high spirits, Tom. It was Mr. McCorkle.

"Mr. McCorkle?"

Yes Tom?

"I'm just wondering why you stay around here. Isn't there someone you'd like me to pass a message along to?"

Nope. My family has all gone on before me. I'm just not ready to leave yet. I guess I'm not quite ready to see what happens next, so I'm just hanging around a bit longer.

Tom considered this for a second before asking, "What's it like for you now, Mr. McCorkle? I mean...how do you *feel*? What do you look like? Do you look the same as you did when you were alive?"

Mr. McCorkle chuckled before saying, those are some interesting questions, Tom. It's hard to explain what it's like to be me now, but I can tell you that I feel sort of light, you know? I still feel like me, only much lighter – which makes sense, I guess, seeing as how I don't have to carry around the weight of my body anymore. As for what I look like, most of the time I'm like a ball of energy, I think. I don't have a body anymore, but if I concentrate really hard, I can turn my energy into an image of my former self. I can make that image any age I want, too. If I tried hard enough, I could even make myself appear to you so you could see me. But it takes an awful lot of energy to do that kind of thing.

"Hmmm... That's interesting. I had no idea. And you can pretty much wander anywhere you want to inside the cemetery?"

Yes. The cemetery and beyond, if I want to – like coming to the

jail to see you. All I have to do is think about where I want to go and I'll go there, if that makes sense.

“Sure, I guess so. I really had no idea you could come see me at the jail, you know? I’m really grateful to Jenny and my mom for coming here to find you and ask you to come. I really appreciate that you would come to help me like that.”

Of course I would, Tom. Had I known you were in trouble, I would have come sooner.

“Well I wish I would’ve known you could do that. I would’ve sent someone for you sooner.”

This conversation gave Tom a lot to think about. He’d never been curious about these kinds of things before, but Jenny had made him begin to wonder. How did it all work? He wondered how many other people there were out there that, like him, could hear the dead. He knew there were psychics and such that could communicate with spirits, but he’d never had much interest in things like that. Until he’d discovered his own ability, he’d never even believed that psychics were for real. But his skepticism was gone now. If *he* could communicate with the dead, who was he to say that other psychic abilities weren’t for real?

* * * *

While Tom was mowing and contemplating psychic abilities, Art Hauxwell and his partner were settling in at their desks in anticipation of finally making some headway on their case. They began making calls to the detectives in the other precincts about canvassing for witnesses who may have seen a white van, telling those detectives only they’d received a tip from an anonymous source. When they finished making those calls, they sat taking a break and waiting to hear if any matches had been found on the partial license plate for the van.

“Obviously, I didn’t give her any details,” Michaels was saying between sips of hot coffee. “But when I told her about the way *our source* was able to channel the victim, my wife was

so excited she couldn’t go back to sleep. Which was a good thing for me – if you know what I mean,” he said in a wink-wink, you know what I mean, tone of voice.

“Yeah, keep it to yourself lover boy,” Art grumbled. “Some of us don’t have a wife in bed waiting when we get home late at night.”

Michaels laughed at his partner’s response and gave Art a bit of teasing before getting serious again. “There’s Jefferson, I’ll go tell him he has to do another canvass – I’m sure that’ll make his day.” He got up and left his desk just as Art’s phone rang.

“Detective Hauxwell,” Art said as he picked up the receiver. He had a brief conversation with the officer at the other end then thanked him and hung up. He stood up and called to Michaels who was across the room and Michaels waved a finger at him. Art sat back down and brought his email up on his computer.

“What’s up?” Michaels said when he returned to his desk.

“Just got a call – they found some possible matches on the van. They’re sending the results over. Ah, here it is!” He opened the email that had just arrived and hit print. He got up and walked to the common printer and came back with a sheet of paper in his hand. “Looks like six possible state-wide, two of those in the city. Let’s start with those.”

Excited because they might have their first potential lead in the case, the two detectives left the station to visit the owners of the two vans belonging to people located in the city. With any luck, the white van would lead them to the killer.

CHAPTER 26

Tom worked through lunch and managed to get most of the mowing done by mid-afternoon. It was hot work and he was covered by sweat, dust, and dirt by the time he exchanged the riding mower for the push mower so he could get to the spaces where the riding mower wouldn't fit. He was hungry but he kept going; the work was keeping his mind off the police investigation and off the pain in his heart that was Rosalie. As he pushed the lawnmower along, cutting the grass between the gravestones one row at a time, he didn't see his mother's car as his mother slowly drove up and down the small road looking for him. He was nearing the big oak tree when his mother spotted him and pulled over and parked. When Tom reached the end of one row and turned to go down the next, he saw his mother leaning out her car window waving to him.

After switching off the mower and wiping his hands and face on his handkerchief, Tom made his way across the cemetery to where his mother sat waiting in her car.

"Get in," his mother said and rolled up the window. Tom brushed off his clothes as best he could then did as he was told and climbed into the passenger seat of his mother's car. The air conditioner was running, and the interior of the car felt blissfully cool. He sighed as he settled into the coolness.

"I figured you would be working hard today," his mother said after they'd exchanged greetings. "I brought you some lunch. I assume you haven't stopped for lunch?"

"No," Tom replied and smiled lovingly at his mother, grateful for her thoughtfulness. She knew him too well sometimes. "Thanks mom. You're the best." His mother smiled and pulled a container out of the bag on the seat between them, opened it and handed it to Tom then fished around in the bag until she came out with a fork. She'd brought him a cold tuna salad and he dug into it with relish. The two of them chatted about this and that as Tom ate his lunch then Mrs. Connor pulled out a bottle of water, telling Tom he

needed to stay well hydrated on a warm day like this. Twisting off the cap, she handed him the bottle.

Tom took the bottle from his mother and took a long drink of the cool water. He hadn't realized how thirsty he'd been until the bottle was nearly empty. His mother laughed and reached into the bag coming out with another bottle of water and telling him she figured he hadn't been taking too many breaks. Tom chuckled as she put the second bottle down on the seat next to him. When he'd finished the tuna salad, he put the lid back on the container and his mother took it from him and deposited it into the bag before pulling out another container and handing it to him.

Tom opened the second container and found chocolate chip cookies which he and his mother shared as they continued talking, each of them avoiding the topic of the police investigation and Tom's experience in jail. After they'd eaten the cookies, Tom passed the container back to his mother and thanked her for bringing him lunch and making him take a break from his work. He told her how good the air conditioning felt and how much he appreciated her thoughtfulness before leaning across the car to kiss her on the cheek. By the time he got out of the car and his mother slowly drove away, Tom felt sated, refreshed, and ready to get back to work.

He walked across the grass on his way back to the lawnmower. As he approached the big oak tree, Tom heard the Martin brothers absorbed in their usual banter and it made him smile. It was somehow comforting to hear the two souls discussing their youthful escapades; it was almost as if nothing had changed and Tom's life had never been disrupted by a murder investigation. Tom wondered if Nancy Wilcox was still here – or if she'd now moved on after they'd finally been able to relay her information to the detectives. If Nancy hadn't moved on already, he expected she would make herself known to him eventually. While Tom wanted the girl's soul to move on, he also (selfishly) wanted her to stay until her killer had

been found. He might need her again at some point. He was relieved he'd been able to pass on the girl's information to detectives and he hoped his part in the investigation was finished, but in case it wasn't, he hoped Nancy would still be around.

* * * *

Jenny Singleton was meeting her friends from Bright Creek to go camping for the weekend. This would be the last weekend she would be able to spend time with her Bright Creek friends before school started in the fall and she was looking forward to their trip. Jenny's dad had driven her to Bright Creek and dropped her off at her uncle's house the night before and her friends would be picking her up there later in the afternoon. Since Jenny had some time to kill before her friends picked her up, she decided to walk over to the cemetery and see how Tom was doing now that he was out of jail. She'd been so relieved when her uncle Art told her Tom had been released and she wanted to make sure he was doing okay – and make sure her uncle Art had listened to Tom and taken him seriously. Her uncle had assured her that he had, but Jenny wanted to hear it from Tom, too.

As she walked toward the cemetery, Jenny saw Mrs. Connor drive past. Mrs. Connor slowed and the two waved and smiled at each other before Mrs. Connor continued on her way. Jenny walked along smiling to herself and thinking what a nice woman Tom's mother was. When she reached the cemetery, she heard the sound of a lawnmower in the distance and decided to head in that direction. As she grew closer to the sound of the mower, she saw Tom out past the big oak tree and decided to stop at her mother's grave because she figured he'd be coming back in that direction once he reached the end of the row anyway.

Stopping at her mother's grave, Jenny stood and quietly talked to her mother for a few minutes. It always brought tears

to her eyes, being here at her mother's grave. She missed her mom so much! She'd started talking to her mother whenever and wherever she felt like it though, hoping that her mother would somehow be able to hear her no matter where she was, but coming here and seeing her mother's name on the gravestone always made Jenny feel the finality of her mother being gone from her life, and that made her want to cry.

As Tom reached the end of the row and turned to come back toward where Jenny stood, he saw her and lifted a hand to wave. Jenny returned the wave and stood waiting until Tom turned off the lawnmower and brushed his hands on his pants. She approached him then and said hello.

"Hi Jenny. What a nice surprise," Tom said. "I'm glad to see you. I wanted to say thank you."

"You're welcome," Jenny said brightly and smiled with pride. "I'm so glad I was able to help you. I guess my uncle Art treated you okay last night?"

"Yes. At least he seemed to take everything I said seriously – and that was something new considering what I've been through lately!"

"Well I'm sure he'll investigate whatever you told him so you have nothing to worry about now," Jenny assured him.

"I hope you're right. Thank you, Jenny. I really do appreciate it and I'm really happy to be back home."

"I'm sure you are. It must've been awful in jail! I can't even imagine – but I'm glad you're home now."

Jenny told Tom she couldn't stay because she was meeting friends soon to go camping for the weekend. Tom told her to have fun – and to be careful – and after saying she would, Jenny left him. She walked back toward the little dirt lane that ran through the cemetery and Tom went back to his mower; Jenny heard the mower start behind her just before she reached the road and turned to go down the hill.

She pulled out her phone when it started to ring in her pocket and answered the call. It was her girlfriend telling her they'd pick her up at her uncle's house in an hour. Jenny told

her she would see them then and she hung up. As she walked down the dirt road toward the street, with Tom mowing in the distance, neither of them noticed the white van slowly rolling along through the cemetery behind her.

* * * *

The two white vans Art and Michaels went to check out in the city were a bust. One of them belonged to the owner of an art supply store and was painted with vivid colors with lettering on the sides and back; the other was registered to a man in a wheelchair who'd had a lift installed and the van was modified to accommodate his wheelchair. The two detectives now had four other vans that might fit the description Tom Hopkins had provided them with and Art hoped they weren't on a wild goose chase.

Since two of the remaining four vans were registered to owners who lived in towns that were several hours from the city, Art contacted the police departments in those two towns and requested officers there check on those vans to see if either of them matched the description they had. If it turned out one – or both – matched, then Art and his partner would have to make the drive and go look into the vans themselves. The third and fourth vans were located within a couple of hours of the city, but in opposite directions. The two detectives sat in their car discussing which direction they should head in first.

"If we look at where our victims were last seen," Michaels was saying, "I'd say we should start with this one," he said as he pointed to the map. "It's not too far from Smith Falls."

Art looked at the map, noting the location of the second van they needed to follow up on and he agreed, "I think you're right. *This one...*" he said as he pointed to the second location, "...is further out and none of the known victims went missing from that area. Of course, it could be that our killer doesn't like to hunt in his own back yard, but we should

probably start with the one near Smith Falls."

Their decision made, Michaels started the car and they pulled away from the curb. "I hope one of these other four vans pans out, because I really want to believe that Hopkins can talk to dead people. We could really use someone like that to help us out on some of the cold cases down at the precinct, you know?"

"I was thinking the very same thing last night," Art responded. "But the jury's still out as far as I'm concerned. If this van thing doesn't pan out, we might have to look back at Hopkins as a suspect. I know my niece believes in this supposed gift of his, but it'll take more than a teenaged girl's word to convince me – even if she is my own niece."

They drove through the streets of the city until they reached the entrance to the expressway and turned onto the ramp. With any luck, traffic would be with them and they wouldn't run into any construction on their way. Art folded up the map and shoved it into the glovebox before putting their destination into the navigation unit. The two detectives tried to hold onto the optimism they'd started the day with as the traffic fell away behind them and they left the city behind.

Two hours later, they reached their destination. The residence they sought was located on a stretch of road with houses spaced fairly regularly, but quite far apart. Michaels slowly drove past the house and they did a visual sweep of the property. It was a single-story house set back from the road and was surrounded by about an acre of property. The garage was detached and sat back from the house; its door closed. Parking out front on the road, Art and Michaels got out of their car and walked up the driveway. They turned onto the front walk, which curved off the driveway, and when they reached the front door, they rang the bell. As they stood waiting for someone to answer the door, Art leaned over and peered into the window. Seeing no signs of movement inside the house, he instructed Michaels to ring the doorbell again. After ringing several times and not getting an answer, they stepped off the

porch and walked around the house. When they came to the back door, Art opened the screen door and knocked on the wood of the interior door; still there was no answer.

"Well, now what?" Michaels asked.

"Why don't you go take a peek in that window on the garage," Art said and pointed to a small window on the side of the garage. "See if there's a van in there." Nodding, Michaels walked across the yard and looked into the window. Seeing no vehicle inside, he shook his head and Art sighed. *All this way for nothing*, he thought. He looked around the property noting the woods that ran along the back and the privacy fence that separated the property from its neighbors on either side. There wasn't a house directly opposite this one, giving it quite a bit of privacy as far as neighborhoods go.

When Michaels rejoined him in the driveway, they conferred on what to do next and decided to split up and walk to the neighboring houses to ask if anyone was familiar with the people who lived here. If they were lucky, one of the neighbors might know if the person they sought was at work, or something, and know what time their neighbor usually got home. If not, they'd either have to sit and wait – hoping the owner of the white van would come home soon – or they'd have to come back another time.

They met at their car about an hour later to compare notes. "The people I talked to didn't know anything," Michaels grumbled. "One lady said they see a guy mowing the lawn from time to time but that they've never met him. Another neighbor said the guy who lives here inherited the house from his aunt who passed away several years ago. Said he's done lots of improvements on the house since he moved in, but apparently he's not overly friendly with his neighbors and they've barely had any conversation with him."

"I only found one neighbor who was home," Art told his partner. "And she said she doesn't really know anyone in the neighborhood because she just moved here. She did say she's seen a white van come and go from this house, though.

And she confirmed that the van doesn't have any type of lettering or anything on it. Plain white, she said."

"Well at least that's something. At least we know it's still a possible match."

"Yeah, but what do we do now? Sit around and wait for a while? See if the van shows up?" Art asked.

"We might as well. I don't think we can check out the other van until tomorrow anyway – it's too far away from here," Michaels replied.

"I guess you're right. Let's at least go find some food while we're waiting. I could use something to eat."

"Sounds good. Maybe by the time we get back somebody will be home. How about you drive for a while?" He handed Art the keys and they got into the car, intent on finding food for their stakeout.

* * * *

It was getting late in the afternoon and Tom had finished mowing the eastern section of the cemetery. He decided to quit for the day and took the push mower back to the shed. After putting everything away and locking up the shed, he walked down the little dirt road intending to go home and shower. As he walked along mentally making a list of things he needed to get done the following day, he began to hear music. He stopped and looked around but before he could discern where the music was coming from, it stopped. Shrugging his shoulders, he started walking again.

Before he reached the end of the road, the music started again. This time it sounded closer. Tom stopped again and listened. He scanned the cemetery, thinking there must be someone there, but he didn't see anyone. Curious, he turned toward the music and started forward to investigate. Again, the music stopped. Confused, he looked left and right, scanning the cemetery as he kept walking, convinced there must be a visitor somewhere. But still he saw no one.

Giving up, Tom turned onto the grass to cut through the graveyard to his cottage and suddenly, the music started again. It was coming from behind him. He turned and stepped back onto the road and looked around. Out of the corner of his eye, he saw something glinting in the late afternoon sun and he walked toward it. As he got closer, he saw a cell phone laying beside the road and it was ringing – except the ringtone was music instead of an actual ringing sound. He stooped and picked it up just as it stopped ringing again.

That explains it, Tom thought. Someone dropped their phone. He was looking down at the phone wondering who dropped it when it began ringing again. The display said it was an incoming call from Megan. After a moment, Tom decided he should answer the call, if only to help him find out whose phone he stood holding.

“Hello?” he said tentatively.

“Um... who is this?” a girl’s voice asked. “Where’s Jenny?”

“Jenny?” Tom asked – and then it hit him and he asked, “Do you mean Jenny Singleton?”

“Yes,” the girl said. “Can I talk to her please?”

“I’m sorry, but she’s not here. I just found her phone on the ground. She must have dropped it earlier when she was here,” Tom explained.

“Well where is *here*? And who are *you*?” the girl demanded.

“Um, *here* is Oak Lawn cemetery and I’m, um, my name is Tom. I’m the caretaker here.” *Click.* The girl hung up. Tom held the phone out in front of himself, wondering why the girl hung up on him. It occurred to him that he should probably call Jenny’s dad and let him know that Jenny had lost her phone. He knew she’d gone away for the weekend with friends and would eventually discover her phone was missing so he should probably let someone know she’d dropped it at the cemetery.

When he tried to look for Jenny’s dad’s phone number,

Tom discovered that the phone was locked and needed a password. Obviously he wasn’t going to be able to use Jenny’s phone to call anyone. He decided he’d have to call from his cottage, so he took the phone and went home. Once inside, he realized he didn’t know Mr. Singleton’s first name. How could he find the man’s telephone number without knowing his first name? Were there many Singletons in Smith Falls, he wondered.

Setting the phone down on his kitchen table, Tom went to wash his hands. He thought about who else he could call – and then an idea struck him. Detective Hauxwell had given Tom his card and *he* was Jenny’s uncle. He could call the detective and let him know Jenny had dropped her phone at the cemetery and Detective Hauxwell could get word to Jenny’s dad.

After drying his hands on the kitchen towel, Tom went to the drawer by the phone and found the card Jenny’s uncle had given him the night before. He picked up the phone and dialed the number then waited for the detective to answer.

“Detective Hauxwell,” said the voice on the other end of the line.

“Detective, this is Tom Hopkins. I’m sorry to bother you, but I didn’t know who else to call.”

“It’s no problem, what can I do for you Mr. Hopkins?”

“Well, Jenny stopped by the cemetery earlier this afternoon. She told me she was going away for the weekend with friends and I was just on my way back home when I found her cell phone laying on the ground. She must have dropped it earlier. It’s locked and I don’t know her dad’s first name, so I couldn’t call him to let him know I’d found it and...”

“I see. I can let him know you’ve got it. I’m sure he and Jenny would appreciate it if you could just hold onto it until someone can come pick it up from you?”

“Yes. Of course...” Tom considered for a split second before asking, “Detective, I don’t suppose you’ve found out anything about the van yet?”

"Not yet. We're checking into some possible matches, but we haven't found anything yet," the detective responded.

"Ah...okay. Thanks. And again, I'm sorry to have bothered you," Tom said.

"No problem. I'll let my brother know you've got Jenny's phone. Thanks for calling."

"Sure," Tom responded before ending the call. He hung up the phone, laid Jenny's phone down on the table by the phone and went to take a shower.

* * * *

Jenny didn't know where she was. Her head hurt and her vision was blurry. Everything looked white. She tried to sit up but found her limbs wouldn't cooperate. A strange, pungent odor filled her nostrils and she felt like she might be sick. She tried to swallow it down and found that her mouth felt fuzzy. Where was she? She couldn't remember where she was or how she'd gotten there. She blinked her eyes a few times, trying to clear her vision, but still she saw only whiteness. Was she dreaming? Maybe she was asleep? Maybe she was home in her own bed. But what was that *smell*? She couldn't recognize it.

Can you smell things in your dreams? Jenny wondered. She felt like the ground was moving beneath her. *What's that sound?* A humming noise was coming from someplace not very far away. She barely had time to wonder about it before the whiteness turned to black and she was out again.

CHAPTER 27

Before Art could punch in his brother's number to call him about Jenny's lost phone, his phone rang, startling him. He could see from the display that it was his brother calling him. *Now that's a coincidence*, Art thought as he answered the call. "Bro, good timing! I was just about to call you."

"Art, something's wrong. Jenny was supposed to go camping with her friends, but she wasn't there when they went to pick her up. Her friend Megan has been calling her all afternoon and she hasn't answered her phone..."

"That's because..." Art tried to interrupt but his brother hurried on.

"...she said the last time she tried Jenny, a man answered."

"That's what I'm trying to tell you. I know where Jenny's phone is," Art said.

"What do you mean?"

"I mean, I just got a call from the caretaker at Oak Lawn Cemetery in Bright Creek. He said Jenny was there earlier today and she must have dropped her phone. He told me he just found it laying by the road. He says he'll hang onto it until one of you can come get it," Art explained.

"But... but where's Jenny?" his brother asked. "When her friends went to pick her up, she wasn't there. Sarah's brother told them he hadn't seen Jenny all afternoon. He told them her camping gear was all ready to go but he wasn't sure where Jenny was. Art, *Jenny is missing!*"

"Hey, calm down! I'm sure she's fine. Let's not jump to conclusions, okay?" Art's mind was racing. The white van hadn't been at the house they'd just visited; and Jenny fit the profile. Could it be possible? No, he thought. *He* shouldn't be jumping to conclusions either.

"Well I'm going to drive over to Bright Creek and look for her," his brother said. "I'll call Chief Creighton on my way and ask him if he can have his patrol officers look for her, too.

Maybe she just lost track of the time because she didn't have her phone on her..." his worried voice trailed off and Art could tell his brother was trying to stay calm.

"Look, I'll call Chief Creighton for you. You just head over there and see if you can find her. Keep me posted. I'll try to get out there to help you as soon as I can, okay? Don't worry. I'm sure Jenny is fine." But he wasn't sure. Art had a bad feeling in the pit of his stomach, and he *was* worried.

Michaels sat slowly chewing his burger and watching his partner. He took a sip of his soda and as soon as Art hung up the phone he asked, "What's going on?"

"My brother says Jenny is missing. Her friends went to pick her up to go up north, but she wasn't there, and she hasn't shown up yet. Tom Hopkins said Jenny came to the cemetery earlier and must have dropped her phone when she was there because he just found it. Says she told him she was going camping before she left the cemetery earlier today."

"Well this stakeout isn't getting us anywhere. Do you want to head over to Bright Creek?"

"Yeah. You mind?" Art asked.

"No. Let's go make sure Jenny is safe. We can come back here tomorrow," Michaels said as he wrapped the rest of his burger and shoved it back into the bag. "You want me to drive?"

"Yeah, that'd be great. I need to make some calls," Art said as he opened the driver's side door and climbed out. They switched places and Michaels started the car. After stowing the fast food bags behind the seat, he pulled away from the curb. Before they'd reached the end of the block, a white van came toward them going in the opposite direction. There was a man behind the wheel.

"Hold up!" Michaels exclaimed as he made a U-turn, "Can you see the plate?" he asked his partner.

"Yes. And there's definitely a one *and* the letter B on it," Art said, excitedly. "But, there's also a grocery store logo on the back door," he added with an exasperated sigh. They

followed the van as it slowly drove down the street and turned into the driveway they'd been watching, and they turned into the driveway behind it. They watched as the garage door opened and the van drove inside. Michaels cut the engine and they both got out of the car.

The van stopped inside the garage and the engine quit. The two detectives stood in the driveway, not approaching the van, as the driver exited the vehicle and came out of the garage. He was white, looked to be about forty, was approximately the same height as Art, and had a compact build. Art's hand tensed and he opened his jacket, exposing his holstered pistol.

The driver of the van looked up curiously when he noticed the men in his driveway. "Uh...can I help you guys?" the man asked as he quickly punched in a code at the side of the garage door and the door began rumbling down behind him. He looked at the detectives suspiciously, noticing the gun under Art's jacket, and his eyes furtively darted from Art to Michaels and back again.

After identifying themselves and establishing the identity of the man as the registered owner of the van they'd come to investigate, Michaels asked if the man would mind if they looked at his van in connection with a case they were investigating. When the man hesitated, Art's stomach dropped. What if Jenny was in the back of that van right now and the man refused to allow them to look at it? They didn't have a warrant and Art knew they couldn't force the man to comply with their request without one.

"I really don't know if I want to let you do that," the man said cautiously. "What's this all about, anyway? Why do you think *my* van was involved in a case you're investigating in the city?"

"Look, all you have to do is let us take a look at your van and we'll be on our way. We're just trying to rule out as many white vans as we can. I agree it's pretty unlikely that your van is the one we're looking for, but we have a list of vans we gotta check out, you know?" Art said, trying to act like it was

no big deal.

"Well, I don't know..." the man said, eyeing them with doubt. "You got a warrant?"

"No, sir. We don't have a warrant," Michaels said, "But we could arrange to get one if you're not willing to cooperate. It would be much easier on everyone if you'd just let us take a quick look without one."

Art felt sweat prickling out between his shoulder blades. Was this guy trying to hide something? Was this their killer? He looked fairly muscular – like he could easily carry a girl's dead body – and the guy *was* looking pretty nervous. "I'll just put in a call to the judge, shall I?" Art said to Michaels who nodded agreement.

Art took a few steps back and pulled out his phone, he pretended to make the call as Michaels continued to talk to the suspect. Art made a point of talking loudly enough for the man to hear him as he supposedly relayed the man's name and address to the imaginary person on the other end of the call. The man nervously looked from Art to Michaels and back again.

"Whoa. That won't be necessary," the man called to Art. "I'll let you look at the van."

Art pretended to end the call and stepped back up beside Michaels as the man, looking defeated, walked back to the keypad and punched in the code to open the garage door. The two detectives hung back as the door rumbled open, then slowly approached and followed the man inside, keeping their distance. Art's senses heightened as the man moved to open the side door of the van, alert for any false move; he noted there were no side windows on the van, but there was another grocery store logo on the front door. He remained tense anyway.

As soon as the man pulled the door open, they were assailed with a strong odor coming from inside the van which Art recognized immediately. He relaxed somewhat when he saw the white sheet that covered something large in the back

of the van.

"Please show us what's under the sheet," Michaels instructed. The man took hold of the sheet and carefully pulled it back a little bit revealing several large marijuana plants.

"You'll tell them I cooperated, right? Put in a good word for me?" the man pleaded after revealing his hidden contraband.

"*This* has nothing to do with our investigation," Michaels said, indicating the plants in the van. He looked at Art and said, "I think we're done here, aren't we?" and Art nodded his agreement. "Thank you for your cooperation, sir."

The man was visibly surprised when he said, "No problem, detectives," and let out a big sigh of relief before wiping a hand across his brow.

Art and Michaels walked back to their car and got inside. "I thought he was our guy, the way he was acting so sketchy and all – and maybe he'd just had the logo painted on the van recently," Michaels said.

"Me too. I was actually thinking he might have Jenny tied up in the back of his van," Art confessed. "Let's drive over to Bright Creek and make sure Jenny is okay. Hopefully my brother will find her before we even get there and this whole thing will be cleared up. Tomorrow we'll go check out that other van."

"Sounds good, partner." Michaels said as he started the car and put it in reverse.

As they drove away from the house, Art's phone rang and he scrambled to get it out of his pocket hoping it was his brother calling to say they'd found Jenny, but he didn't recognize the number. He answered the call to discover it was a police officer calling him about one of the other vans. The officer told Art they'd gone to the address Art had provided them with and talked with the owner of the van. He said they'd inspected the van and it didn't match his description; the van was a passenger van with two rows of seats *and* side windows. Art thanked the officer for following up on it for them and

hung up. He told Michaels they could check another van off their list. That left two vans. Could one of them belong to their killer?

* * * *

After he showered, Tom stood in front of the mirror staring at his reflection. The stress of the past several days showed in his face. He'd spent the day working hard, trying to get things back to normal, and he was exhausted. For the most part, he'd been able to keep his mind off the events of the past week, but he'd been less successful keeping Rosalie out of his thoughts. He missed his wife so much! He closed his eyes and brought her face to mind. The way she smiled; the glint in her eye when she was being clever; the way she would look at him right before he kissed her. His heart ached at the memories.

With his eyes still closed, Tom began to speak out loud to Rosalie. "I miss you Rosalie. I wish I could see you one more time. I wish I could hear your voice." It occurred to him that she hadn't even been in his dreams since his last night in the Bright Creek jail. "Please come back to me Rosalie. I need you to come to me," he whispered.

He let out a long sigh and opened his eyes. When he did, he caught a flash of movement behind him and there stood Rosalie, mere steps from him, smiling at him in the mirror. Tom whirled around but in an instant, she was gone; as quickly as she'd appeared, she'd disappeared. Stunned, he turned back to look in the mirror but she was no longer there either. Surely he must have imagined it, he thought; perhaps it was a trick of the sunlight slanting in through the window? But Tom wanted to believe it had been real; he wanted to believe he'd just seen his wife standing behind him.

"Was it really you Rosalie?" Tom whispered.

Yes Tom. It was me.

Tom couldn't believe his ears. He heard Rosalie's voice as if she stood right behind him. He slowly turned around

again, hoping to see her standing there, but she wasn't. "Are you here? Am I hearing things?"

I'm here my love.

"B-but... how?" Tom asked in awe. "And why... why now?"

Because you asked me to come.

"I..." Tom tried to remember. Had he asked her to come? What had he said? He couldn't remember. "I miss you so much, Rosalie," was all he could think to say.

I know you do, my love. But I am always with you – even when you can't see or hear me. I will always be with you.

Tom couldn't believe his Rosalie was actually there with him; speaking to him. There were so many things he'd longed to say to her since she'd left him, so many things he'd wished he could tell her, and now he could think of nothing to say except to tell her that he loved her. He started to cry, overwhelmed by her presence.

Don't cry my love! Just know that I am aware of it each time you think of me. I am aware of everything you say to me when you talk to me. I may not answer, but I do hear you. I love you and I will never be far away.

"But I don't understand. How are you here *now*? Why are you speaking to me *now* when you've never spoken to me before?" Tom wanted to know.

You've never asked me to come to you before. All you've ever had to do was ask me to come.

"But..." Tom didn't understand it. All he had to do was ask her to come? Had he never asked her before? He didn't know; couldn't remember. He'd talked to her often enough. "Can I see you again? Can you show yourself to me again?"

I could, but it's very draining for me. It takes a lot of energy to make myself be seen. It tires me too quickly. I would not be able to stay with you very long if I expended all of my energy now.

"You'll stay with me, then? You'll never leave me again?"

I can't stay with you always, my darling. I have transcended this

world and my place is elsewhere now. But I am always aware of you. If you ask me to come, I will come to you, wherever you may be.

Tom stood there in the bathroom and through his tears he told Rosalie all the things he could think of to tell her. He wasn't sure how long she'd be there to hear his words – and more importantly, to respond to them – so he talked to his wife until he could speak no more and then he laid down on his bed and she spoke softly to him until he fell asleep. When Tom was asleep, Rosalie entered his dreams and held him. She told him she would forever love him, and she would be waiting for him when his time came to be with her again. She kissed him deeply before leaving his dream and when Tom woke hours later, he could smell Rosalie's perfume on his pillow. He began to cry again when he realized she was gone.

It was dark outside when Tom finally dried his eyes and got up off the bed. He went to the kitchen feeling like he could eat a horse. Rosalie had said it took a lot of energy for her to come to him – to be seen by him – but Tom felt as though *he* was the one who'd been sapped of energy. He'd never felt so drained after talking to any of the spirits he'd encountered in the cemetery and he wasn't sure if his emotions had drained him or if it was something else; something to do with Rosalie coming to him from wherever she was now.

After putting on a pot of water to boil, Tom took a box of spaghetti from the cupboard and pulled a jar of sauce from the refrigerator. It would take a while for the water to boil, but a big pot of spaghetti would fill the gaping hole in his stomach. He only hoped he could stay awake long enough to eat it.

* * * *

Art and his partner pulled into Tom's driveway as Tom was putting his water on to boil. It was after dark and there'd been no sign of Jenny. Art had called Chief Creighton from the road and patrols were on the lookout for her, but she hadn't been seen. Jenny's family and friends had been out walking the

streets all afternoon and looking everywhere they could think of, but no one had seen her anywhere. If they didn't find Jenny soon, it would be one of the longest nights of Art's life.

Art got out of the car and went to Tom's door and knocked. When Tom opened the door, he looked to Art like a man who hadn't slept for a week. "Mr. Hopkins," Art began.

"Please, call me Tom. Have you come for Jenny's phone?" Tom asked.

"I... yes. But I also wanted to know if Jenny had come back for it herself. I guess not?"

"No. I haven't seen her since early this afternoon. Is something wrong? Did she not go camping with her friends?" Tom asked with concern as Detective Michaels approached. "I'm sorry, please come in." Tom stepped back and opened the door wide and the two detectives came inside.

"Please tell me what's going on. Is Jenny okay?" Tom wanted to know.

"We don't know. She never showed up at her uncle's house to meet her friends and nobody has seen or heard from her. I think you may have been the last one to see her." Art was trying not to be suspicious of Hopkins, but the man looked exhausted, like he'd been up to some particularly tiring activities and Art couldn't help but wonder if the man had something to do with Jenny's disappearance.

Tom invited the detectives into the kitchen and asked them to take a seat. The two men sat down at the kitchen table while Tom went to the stove and turned off the pot of water that was just beginning to steam. He pulled out a chair and joined them at the table.

"About what time would you say you last saw Jenny?" Art asked.

"Uh... I'd guess it was around two – or a bit before maybe. My mother had just come over to bring me some lunch and we'd been sitting in her car talking for a bit afterward. I remember glancing at the clock in the car as I got out and it said one-thirty. Jenny showed up not too long after I'd gone

back to work with the mower."

"And did she say anything about where she was going when she left you? Was she planning on running any errands or anything that you're aware of?"

"No. I mean, if she was, she didn't say so. She told me she was meeting her friends over at Mr. Campbell's house to go up north. I assumed she was going straight back there. I went back to mowing as soon as she left, so I didn't even pay attention to which way she went when she left – other than to see her walk down the hill that is."

"And her phone, you said you found it on the ground?" Art asked.

"Yes. I was on my way home and I kept hearing this music. Turns out it was Jenny's phone ringing. I answered it because I thought I might be able to find out who the phone belonged to. A girl was on the line and she hung up on me when I told her who I was. Let me get the phone for you," Tom said and got up from the table. He went to the front room where he'd left Jenny's phone and brought it back. He handed it to Art, who indicated that he should set it down on the table – which Tom did – then the detective asked Tom if he had a plastic bag. Tom went to the counter, opened a drawer, and got a plastic bag which he handed to Art then he sat back down.

Thinking the phone might possibly turn into evidence, Art used the plastic bag to pick it up and he put it inside the bag to preserve any fingerprints that might be found on it. He still hoped Jenny was fine, but his cop's instincts told him not to take the situation lightly. Jenny had been missing for hours and her phone might possibly hold a clue to her whereabouts. Art pushed the button and the display lit up, but when he tried to get past the lock screen, he found the phone needed a password, just as Hopkins had told him earlier. He sealed the bag and put the phone in his pocket.

"I know it's pretty dark outside," Art said to Tom, "But can you show us where you found the phone?"

Tom agreed to show the detectives where he found the phone and after grabbing a flashlight, he led them outside. Michaels went to the car and retrieved his own flashlight and the three men set out across the cemetery to where Tom had found the phone.

"I think it was about here," Tom said and shined his flashlight at the ground next to the dirt road. Art pulled a penlight from his pocket and he and Michaels scanned the area, looking for anything that might be helpful, but finding nothing out of the ordinary. Since it was getting darker, they decided they'd better come back in the morning when they'd be able to go over the grounds more thoroughly.

"What can I do to help?" Tom asked Art as they walked back across the lawn toward his cottage.

"Unfortunately, as of right now I don't think there's anything you can do to help," Art told him. "If Jenny doesn't turn up tonight, we'll get started looking for her first thing in the morning. There's not much else we can do tonight."

"I'd like to help look for her tomorrow if that's okay?" Tom asked.

"Yes. Of course. I'd appreciate that and I'm sure Jenny's dad would too. I'll plan to meet you here first thing in the morning and we'll go from there, okay?"

"Yes. But I'll be hoping Jenny turns up before then – safe and sound," Tom said with sincerity.

The men shook hands and Tom stood on his porch and watched as the detectives backed out of his driveway and drove away. He was exhausted, and finding out that Jenny was missing had made him forget about food entirely. He went inside the house and put the spaghetti things away. He dumped out the pot of water then he got ready for bed. But once he was in bed, Tom couldn't fall asleep. He was tired beyond belief, but his mind wouldn't let him fall asleep. He was worried about Jenny. What could have happened to her? Had she been involved in an accident of some kind? He was sure Jenny's father – or Chief Creighton – would have contacted

the hospital by now. Tom knew there was nothing he could do tonight so he closed his eyes and waited for sleep to come, hoping he would see Rosalie again in his dreams.

CHAPTER 28

When Tom woke the following morning, he couldn't remember a single dream and it disappointed him. He'd slept soundly the entire night, so at least he woke well rested and refreshed. Knowing Detective Hauxwell would be coming back this morning, Tom got out of bed and took a quick shower before getting dressed and putting on a pot of coffee. He'd just put scrambled eggs on the stove when he heard a car pull into the driveway. He turned off the flame under the eggs and reached the front door just as someone knocked. He opened the door to find Detective Hauxwell on the other side.

Tom invited Art in and excused himself to get the eggs off the stove. "Would you like some breakfast, Detective? Coffee maybe?" Tom called from the kitchen.

Walking into Tom's kitchen Art responded, "Thanks but I've already eaten. I could use another cup of coffee though, if it's not too much trouble. An extra jolt of caffeine would be good after the long, sleepless night I've had."

"It's no trouble. Take a seat. Did you and your brother get any rest at all last night?" Tom asked as he took another mug from the cupboard and poured coffee into it.

"Not much," Art replied. "It was a rough night, that's for sure."

Tom placed the steaming mug on the table in front of his guest before bringing his plate to the table and sitting down. "I take it there's no news about Jenny?"

"No," Art said as he took a sip of the hot coffee. "Chief Creighton checked with hospitals and police departments and such last night and found nothing – which, on its face, is good news – and her friends and family have been going door-to-door asking if anyone has seen her, but they haven't turned up any leads. It appears that you were the last one to see her when she was here yesterday."

Tom pushed his half-finished eggs away and said, "I can't believe this. We have to find her. What if Nancy's killer

has been in Bright Creek?"

"That's exactly what I'm afraid of. And so far, we haven't been able to find the van you described to us. We had six possible matches - but we've been able to eliminate four of those. If the other two don't pan out, we're back to square one," Art confided.

"That gives me an idea," Tom said and pushed back from the table. "Maybe I can talk to some of the spirits that reside in the cemetery. Maybe they saw something yesterday." He stood up and took his unfinished breakfast and coffee to the sink.

Art took a quick sip of his coffee and stood up as well. "What do you need to do? Is there some type of 'summoning' you have to do?" Art had no idea how this kind of stuff worked and since Michaels had gone home the night before, he couldn't pick Michaels' brain on the topic. His partner seemed to know a lot about the subject, but Art was clueless.

"Well, no. Not exactly," Tom replied. "Usually I just go out into the cemetery and I can typically find them somewhere near their graves. I think they hang around their graves because that's where the living come to visit them. I'm kind of new to the whole thing myself – I mean I haven't always been able to communicate with the dead – it's only been the past couple of years or so."

"Hmm... Interesting. Shall we go outside then? See what you can do?" Art suggested.

"Yes. Let's go."

The two men left the house and walked across the lawn and into the cemetery. Tom led the detective to the spot he'd shown them the night before. "This is where I found the phone," he said, pointing to the ground near the road. "Do you want to have a look around while I try to find a spirit who will talk to me?"

Art told him to go do whatever he needed to do and he would examine the area for any clues. Tom nodded and turned to walk down the row of headstones. He knew there

were still a few souls residing in this quadrant of the cemetery and he headed for one of their headstones, talking aloud as he went, asking if there was anyone there.

While Tom walked along seeking a spirit, Art swept the area looking for anything unusual. There were some tire tracks on the edge of the grass not far from where Tom had told him he'd found Jenny's phone, but Art couldn't be sure they were relevant. He took out his phone and snapped a few pictures anyway. As he was inspecting the grass adjacent to the tire tracks, he noticed the sun glinting off something small in the grass a few feet away. When he went to investigate, he found a small, gold earring laying in the grass near a small divot in the lawn. Was it possible the divot had been caused in a struggle? Could the earring belong to Jenny?

He took a few pictures of the area before carefully retrieving the earring with a tissue. He laid the tissue on top of a headstone and snapped a close-up of the earring before carefully putting it into his pocket. He sent the photo to his brother to find out if the earring belonged to Jenny then continued to look around for any other signs of struggle. Finding nothing else, Art went back to the road and crossed to the grass on the other side.

Just as Art had decided there was nothing on the other side of the road to be seen, Tom came quickly walking down the road and called out to him. When Tom was close enough to be heard he said, "Detective! I spoke with a spirit whose grave is just over there." He pointed to where he'd been then said, "And she said she saw Jenny yesterday and she said she also saw a white van driving past and it stopped near Jenny. She said the van blocked her view of Jenny when it stopped, but when the van moved, Jenny was no longer in sight. I'm worried, Detective! I think Nancy's killer has Jenny!"

Art's phone rang; it was his brother. When Art answered, his brother sounded panicked. "I don't know if it's Jenny's earring! Where did you find it? Why do you think it's Jenny's?" he demanded.

Art tried to calm his brother. He told him he'd found the earring in the cemetery, not too far from where Tom had found Jenny's phone, but that it didn't mean the earring was Jenny's. He asked his brother if maybe one of Jenny's friends might recognize it and his brother, who was obviously trying to keep his emotions under control, said he'd ask around and let Art know if anyone recognized the earring. Art didn't tell his brother what Tom had just told him; instead, he assured his brother they'd find Jenny then he hung up.

Turning to Tom Art asked, "Tom, do you think one of your spirits could find Jenny? Can they do that kind of thing? I know I've read about physics who have supposedly located missing people..." he left it hanging, uncertain about what he was asking.

"I don't know," Tom answered. "But we can try. Let me find Mr. McCorkle, he seems to know a lot of stuff. Maybe he can help."

Satisfied there was nothing else for him to find near the area the phone was found, Art followed Tom through the cemetery until they came to the grave of Andrew McCorkle then he stood back and observed.

"Mr. McCorkle? Are you here?" Tom asked.

I'm here, Tom.

"He's here," Tom told Art. "Mr. McCorkle, we need your help!"

Tom explained to the spirit what they thought had happened and asked for his help. Could he find Jenny? Did he have a way to locate her? But Tom was disappointed in the answers he received.

I can't help you, Tom. I'm sorry. I could go to Jenny if I knew where she was, but I have no way of locating her. If I knew where she was, I could pop in there in an instant, but if I don't know where she is there's nothing I can do.

After thanking Mr. McCorkle anyway, Tom relayed what the spirit had told him to Art. He was frustrated. What good was this supposed "gift" of his if he couldn't help Jenny?

"I'm sorry, Detective," Tom said dejectedly, feeling like a failure.

"Well, it was worth a try, Tom. At least you tried." Art was frustrated too. His niece was out there somewhere, possibly in the hands of a cold-blooded serial killer, and he didn't have the slightest idea how he was going to find her.

* * * *

Jenny opened her eyes. At first, she thought it was nighttime, but then she realized there was something covering her eyes. She tried to lift a hand to remove it and that's when the panic set in. She was lying on her back and she couldn't lift her arms or legs; she realized she was tied down. A rush of adrenaline hit her veins and she began bucking wildly, trying to free herself. She heard whimpering but it didn't register that the sound was coming *from her*. Jenny struggled against her bonds, but she couldn't get loose. Her mind was wild with fear and confusion. Where was she? How did she get there? And why was she tied down?

Think! she commanded herself. Calm down and THINK! What could she remember? She remembered she was supposed to go camping for the weekend. She remembered her father driving her to Bright Creek and dropping her off; she remembered leaving her camping gear at her uncle's house while she went to see Tom; she remembered Tom mowing the grass... But that was all she could remember. She couldn't remember anything after that. Where *was* she? Who had done this to her?

Jenny knew she had to remain calm. Her uncle Art always told her you needed to stay calm in an emergency situation; it was important not to panic and to always keep a cool head. She tried to slow her labored breathing then she took a few deep breaths and tried to *listen*. Was she alone? A new surge of panic erupted inside her at the thought that there could be someone there with her; watching her. She tamped it

down, telling herself she needed to stay calm and she needed to stay smart.

Jenny was smart enough to know she was in a nasty situation. She thought about Nancy Wilcox which caused her to suck in a breath and hold it when she realized she'd most likely been abducted by Nancy's killer. *Stay calm, stay calm, stay calm...* she told herself as she strained to hear any sounds that would indicate someone was nearby. After what seemed like several minutes, she hadn't heard anything that made her feel like she wasn't alone, so she let out a sigh and relaxed just a little bit. If she was alone, she had time to think; she had time to work at her restraints to see if she could free herself. *You're going to get free, Jenny! Just concentrate. You can do this!*

* * * *

Art left the cemetery and went back to the Campbell's house where his brother was assembling volunteers to continue the search for Jenny. His brother had let Art use his car to go to the cemetery and Art knew his brother would be antsy for his return – not only because he was without a car to go look for Jenny, but because he would expect Art to be able to *do something*. But Art wasn't sure what to do. If he was to believe Tom Hopkins, Jenny had possibly been abducted by a serial killer driving a white van – but could he believe Tom Hopkins?

Art knew he would have to do something – and fast – because time was always of the essence in missing persons cases. He decided it would be best for him to contact his friend who worked in the media and get it out on television that Jenny was missing. With that plan of action in mind, he drove through Bright Creek knowing he at least had something proactive to offer his brother.

When he reached the Campbell's house, Art was met with a crowd of townspeople who had gathered to help search for Jenny. He took his brother aside to discuss a plan of action.

Someone had printed up *Missing* posters with recent photos of Jenny on them and Art told his brother they should send most of the people who were gathered out to distribute and post them in and around Bright Creek; they would send some to Smith Falls as well. He told his brother they could use one of the fliers to give to the media to run a story on the news about Jenny's disappearance in hopes someone may have seen Jenny and come forward with information.

As Art's brother was announcing to the people who were milling about what he needed them to do, a teenaged girl approached Art. "Excuse me," she said, "Are you Jenny's Uncle Art? The policeman?"

"Yes, and you are?"

"I'm Megan. Jenny was supposed to meet me yesterday to go up north."

"Oh, I see. What can I do for you Megan?"

"Well, Jenny's dad was asking around about an earring that you found. My friends told me he was showing them a picture? I was wondering if I could take a look at it?"

"Of course," Art said and took out his phone to pull the picture up. He handed it to Megan and asked, "Do you recognize it?"

Megan took the phone from him and looked at the picture for a moment then she looked up at Art with concern in her eyes and said, "Y-yes. I gave them to Jenny for her birthday."

* * * *

After Detective Hauxwell had left him, Tom went back home. He knew he wouldn't be working today. He was worried about Jenny and feared for her life but he didn't know what he could do to help her. He wanted to help look for her, though, so he decided to go see his mother and let her know what was going on; he knew his mother would want to help in the search for Jenny, too.

Tom also wanted to tell his mother about Rosalie having come to him the night before. He felt now as though it had all been a dream, except he'd been wide awake when it happened. He couldn't wait to discuss it with his mother and share with her what the experience had been like. It was difficult to understand how it had happened – but then, Tom barely understood this gift he had and lately he'd been continually learning new and surprising aspects of it.

He quickly cleaned up the mess in the kitchen, tossing his eggs and pouring out the coffee then he locked up the house and set off for his mother's house. Afterward, he would go to the Campbell's house to see how he might be able to help in the search for Jenny; he expected his mother would want to come as well.

* * * *

Art went to the Bright Creek police station to confer with Chief Creighton and to make Jenny's case an official missing persons case. It hadn't been twenty-four hours yet, but because of Jenny's age he didn't Creighton would make him wait to file an official report. When he got to the station, the officer at the front desk escorted him to the chief's office where Creighton was on the phone. Art took a seat and waited.

Creighton hung up the phone and greeted Art in a relaxed, friendly manner and the two men had a brief discussion about the missing persons' report. "I just have to ask," Creighton said, "if there's any possibility your niece could have run away?"

"No. Not a chance. She's not the type," Art said with certainty. "Besides, she had clothes packed – she would've taken at least her necessities and her phone charger, but she didn't take any of it. What teenaged girl would run away without her phone charger?"

"I guess you're right. But I did have to ask. I'll get the paperwork and we'll get the report filed right away. Just give

me a minute," Creighton said as he got up from behind his desk and left the office. When he returned, he handed Art a form and a pen so he could fill out the report then he sat back down behind his desk. Once Art finished filling out the form, he handed it to Creighton who looked it over.

"I'll have this typed up and then I'll bring it over to have your brother sign it. Is there anything else I can do to help at this point?"

Art let the chief know they would be putting word out through the media about Jenny's disappearance and warned him that they would be giving out the telephone number for the Bright Creek police department for people to call with information about Jenny. Creighton's people would have to field any calls that came in after the story ran. Creighton assured Art that he would have things set up to handle the calls by the time the story went out and told him not to worry, they would have plenty of volunteers to man the phones.

His mission there completed, Art thanked Chief Creighton and left the police station. As he was leaving the station, his phone rang; it was his partner, Michaels. "Art, how's it going? Any luck finding Jenny?"

"No. Nothing so far except for some tire tracks and a lost earring that one of Jenny's friends has identified as belonging to Jenny. I found them near where Hopkins said he found her phone. And if Hopkins is to be believed, one of his ghosts saw a white van in the cemetery at the time Jenny was last seen. I swear, I'm beginning to wonder if Hopkins isn't scamming us to deflect attention away from himself!"

"You really think he could be involved in all of this?" Michaels asked.

"Hell, I don't know. But I'm not ruling it out," Art responded.

"Well I've got news about the other out-state van. Turns out it belongs to an electrician who not only has lettering on the back and sides, but also has special racks mounted on top. I've got Smitty with me and we're on our way now to

check out the last one – then we'll know whether this whole thing has been a wild goose chase or not."

"Great. Let me know as soon as you find out anything. In the meantime, I think I'd better keep an eye on Hopkins – just in case," Art said.

"Do you really think he's responsible for Jenny's disappearance?" Michaels asked. "I was really hoping the guy was on the level with this medium stuff."

"I don't know what to think. But he *was* the last one to see her, and he's the one who had information about Nancy Wilcox's murder that he shouldn't have had..."

"While part of me wants to believe Hopkins is on the level, the cop part of me thinks you could be right. We're pulling up to our address now. I'll let you know what I find out."

Art hung up and decided he would go find Tom Hopkins and stick with him until he heard back from Michaels about the last van on their list. *If* Hopkins has been lying about his ability to communicate with the dead then he could be involved not only in Nancy Wilcox's murder but in Jenny's disappearance as well. If Hopkins was involved in Jenny's disappearance, and has her locked away somewhere, Art was going to stick to his side so he wouldn't be able to harm Jenny until Art could figure out how to find her.

He went to the parking lot and got into his brother's car to drive back to the cemetery and find Hopkins. He could get Hopkins involved in the search for Jenny and keep him where he would be able to watch him and make sure he couldn't get to Jenny – assuming he was the one who had taken Jenny. If Hopkins wasn't involved in Jenny's disappearance, then Art had his work cut out for him finding her and he knew the first twenty-four hours were crucial.

Art pulled into Tom's driveway and cut the engine. He got out, went to the door, and knocked. There was no answer. He could see no signs of life and there were no sounds to be heard from inside the house. He knocked again, louder this

time, and still Hopkins didn't answer. He turned and walked off the porch. He scanned the yard and saw no sign of anyone, so he walked across the lawn and into the cemetery. When he reached the little dirt road, he turned and headed for the shed he could see off in the distance.

Upon reaching the shed, he found it closed and locked securely. He walked around the tiny building, his cop's brain spinning with suspicion. There was a small window, obscured by ivy, and Art leaned in and pulled back a bit of ivy to take a look inside. After wiping dirt from the window, he peered inside. The shed appeared to be full of lawn equipment, ladders, and other items one would expect to be contained in the shed of a cemetery caretaker. He stepped away from the shed and brushed his hands on his pants thinking that he would have to be careful not to get himself too dirty because he didn't have a change of clothes. He'd had to go to the drugstore the night before for a toothbrush and deodorant and he had no idea how long it would be until he could get home for clean clothes.

Turning around, Art looked up the hill, slowly scanning the cemetery for signs of movement. When he saw none, he began walking up the lane, looking this way and that for any sign that Hopkins was near. When he got to the top of the slope he stopped and listened, hoping to hear a lawnmower or weed trimmer or other such thing that would indicate Tom's location – but he heard nothing. The only sounds were the sounds of nature and the occasional car passing out on the street.

His eye was drawn to a mausoleum that sat atop a small hill in the distance. Art wondered, *could Hopkins have Jenny in there?* He'd been waffling back and forth on whether or not he believed Tom was capable of talking to ghosts – but what if he wasn't? And what if he was the one who killed Nancy Wilcox? If Tom Hopkins was somehow involved in Nancy's abduction and murder, he might be housing a torture chamber right here in the middle of the cemetery.

Art purposefully strode toward the mausoleum, skirting gravestones as he crossed to the other side of the cemetery. He knew it was a long shot, but he had to check into the possibility, didn't he? His imagination started running wild and an image of his niece being locked in a mausoleum surrounded by coffins flooded his senses with an urgency to reach the ancient-looking tomb. He nearly tripped over a gravestone as he began running toward the building. When he reached it, he was sweating and breathing heavily – more from stress than from the exercise of crossing the cemetery – and he felt frantic with the knowledge that Jenny was inside this monument to the dead that stood before him.

There was a very old, very heavy-looking iron gate closed over the door that led inside. Art noted the lock on the gate was fairly new and his suspicion grew. Alarm bells were going off in his brain. Was his niece in there? Had Hopkins had her hidden here all along? Had Hopkins been stringing them along in some sick, twisted game? Art grabbed ahold of the lock and pulled; he rattled it back and forth, but it was locked tight.

“Jenny!” he called out in near panic. “Jenny! Are you in there?” He moved around to the side of the building, looking for another way in but found no other doors or windows. The building was solid stone and concrete; built to last. Art knew he needed to calm himself. *You're a cop for chrissakes! Get a grip on yourself, will you?* He took a deep breath and let it out, knowing he was being irrational. He had to remain calm to be able to do his job effectively. He'd always taught Jenny and the rest of his nieces and nephews that the first rule in an emergency situation was to stay calm and here he was on the verge of full-blown panic.

Art stopped and listened for any sounds that might be coming from inside the small building. Hearing nothing, he walked back around to the entrance. He grabbed the gate and leaned in as close as he could to the door, listening. “Jenny?” he called out again – and then he listened. He heard nothing

from inside; no sounds whatsoever. He let go of the bars and took a step back, turning to look around. Seeing two other structures such as the one he now stood in front of, he decided to *calmly* go check those out too. If Jenny was here in this cemetery, Art was going to find her.

* * * *

As soon as Tom and his mother arrived at the Campbell's house, Tom felt uncomfortable. It wasn't just the few people milling about who pointed and whispered as he and his mother walked up to the house, it was also a sense of something else that Tom couldn't quite put his finger on. As they approached the front porch, he felt a wave of dizziness. He stopped, putting his hand on his mother's shoulder and she turned to him with concern.

“Tom, what's wrong? Are you okay?” his mother asked.

After a moment, the dizziness passed and he took his hand off her shoulder. “Yes. I'm okay. Just felt a little weird for a second.”

Get all these people off of my porch! a woman's voice shouted. Tom's head snapped up and he looked around. The porch ran across the front of the house and there were several people gathered around a small table that was strewn with papers but nobody looked up or seemed concerned by the woman's shout.

“Mom,” Tom said quietly, “Did you just hear a woman yelling?”

His mother was confused, “No, dear. I didn't hear...” and then it hit her. “Tom, did *you* hear a woman yelling?” she asked conspiratorially. “What did she say?”

“She wants all these people off her porch,” Tom told her. “I think she's not the only spirit that resides in this house, either,” he said as he looked up at the big, old, Victorian structure.

As Tom and his mother stood there at the bottom of the steps, they heard a car pull up and turned to see a police cruiser stop at the curb. Tom had no problem recognizing the officer who got out – it was Hanson, the one who'd been so snide and condescending to him. Hanson strode purposefully up the walk toward them making Tom's stomach drop, but when he saw them he just nodded and stepped around them to mount the steps to the porch. They watched as he conferred with Mr. Singleton who was among the people on the porch, then Hanson turned and came back to stand at the top of the steps.

“People!” Officer Hanson called out. “Can I get your attention please?”

Was this something about Jenny? Had they found her? Tom looked around behind him at the people who were coming closer to hear what Hanson had to tell them. He could see the curiosity on their faces as they moved *en masse* toward the porch. When everyone had moved in close and quieted, Hanson spoke.

“There’s going to be a story coming out on the news about Jenny Singleton’s disappearance which we hope will lead to information that will help us find her. We’re going to need some volunteers to answer phones down at the police station. Anyone who would like to assist is asked to come down to the police station as soon as possible so we can have everyone ready when the story goes out on the air. Thank you.”

Hanson waved off the few questions people called out to him, telling them to go down to the police station if they needed more information, then he went back to the group of people on the porch. Tom looked down at his mother, an unspoken question in his eyes, and she nodded in agreement. They turned and walked toward the street, headed for the police station to volunteer. As they moved away from the house, the strange feeling that had come over Tom when they’d arrived there slowly dissipated and he was glad he hadn’t needed to go up on the porch. The Campbell house definitely

had some spirit activity that Tom was glad to avoid.

* * * *

Jenny! Was someone calling to her? *Jenny!* She woke with a start, her heart pounding. Someone had been calling her name, but who was it? It took her only a moment to remember where she was – or more precisely, the predicament she was in. She couldn’t believe she’d fallen asleep! She had no idea how long she’d been there, but she knew she’d worked at pulling her hands free for what had seemed like hours and she’d merely succeeded in making her wrists sore and raw.

Thankfully, she felt as though she was still alone in this room she was in. But she heard movement; muffled sounds coming from somewhere outside of the room. Was it her kidnapper? She knew she must stay quiet. Maybe her kidnapper was waiting for her to wake up. She tried to stay calm. She could hear her Uncle Art’s voice in her head, *the first rule in an emergency situation is to stay calm*. How many times had he told them that? The thought of her uncle made Jenny want to cry (but she knew she mustn’t). Was he looking for her right now? Did anyone know she was missing? How long had she been gone?

The sounds from outside the room slowly drew further away then stopped altogether. Jenny hadn’t noticed the smell before, but whatever it was, Jenny didn’t recognize it. She vaguely remembered having smelled it before, but she thought it had been much stronger then. She couldn’t be sure, but she sensed the room she was in was not very big. It felt close and damp. Afraid to make any noise, she didn’t speak or call out even though it might give her a better feel for the size of the room she was in. The last thing she wanted was for her captor to hear her and come into the room with her.

* * * *

After checking out the other mausoleums and finding no signs of life, Art gave up. He walked down the small dirt lane and ended up back at the bottom of the hill near the shed again. He decided he would take another look around where he'd found Jenny's earring before he left the cemetery. Now that he knew the earring definitely belonged to Jenny, it might warrant another search of the area where it, and her cell phone, had been found.

Although his search of the cemetery had been fruitless so far, Art couldn't shake the nagging doubts he was having about Tom Hopkins. The search Hopkins had sent them on for the white van was looking like a complete waste of time; he knew things about Nancy Wilcox's murder that he shouldn't have known; he was the last person to see Jenny before she went missing... In Art's mind, things just weren't adding up – at least not in the direction that Tom Hopkins wanted. As he swept the ground near the spot he'd found the earring, Art was coming up with more and more questions about Tom Hopkins.

Finding nothing more where he'd found the earring, Art walked back to Hopkins' house where he'd left his brother's car. As he slid behind the wheel and started the engine, he decided to call Chief Creighton and ask him where Hopkins' mother lived. Maybe she would know where her son was – because he certainly wasn't at home or in the cemetery and Art wanted to talk to him. Art had questions and he wanted answers. He dialed the Chief's number and waited for an answer.

"Chief Creighton."

"Creighton, Detective Hauxwell here. I'm looking for Tom Hopkins and I..." Art began.

"He's here," Creighton interrupted.

"What? He's there? At the police station?"

"Yes. He and his mother came in a little while ago after we put out a call for volunteers to man the phones. We've got a few officers and several volunteers answering phones.

"There've been a lot of calls since the story went out on the news – but before you ask, we haven't received anything helpful yet. Why people insist on calling in and tying up the lines when they don't have any useful information is beyond me!" he complained.

"Chief, do me a favor. Keep Tom there until I can get there, okay? I want to talk to him," Art said.

"Sure. I'll make sure he doesn't leave until you get here," Creighton promised. "Any developments on your end?"

"No. Nothing yet. I'll see you soon," Art responded before hanging up. He slowly backed out of Tom's driveway, checking for traffic before backing into the street. Satisfied that someone was keeping an eye on Tom, he put the car in gear and headed for the Campbell's house to stop and check in with his brother before going back to the police station. Before he'd gone very far, his phone rang; it was his partner.

"Art, we've checked on the van. Turns out it belongs to a young guy – a musician," Michaels told him. "He lives in an apartment complex. We talked to some of the guy's neighbors who told us he's been out on tour with his band for the past several months. Nobody was sure if there were any windows in the van or not, but they confirmed that it was plain white, no graphics of any kind on it. I'm going to drop Smitty back at the station so he can check into this band; see if he can verify that the guy is actually on tour and if so, where he's been. Any news on Jenny?"

"No. Nothing yet." Art was tired of giving that answer. "I'm on my way to check in with my brother. Creighton says they've been getting some calls since we put the story out in the media, but nothing that's helping."

"I'm sorry to hear that," Michaels said. "I'm going to head out there after I drop Smitty off, I'd like to help. I'll swing by your place and pick up a change of clothes for you. Hang in there, buddy. We'll find her."

"I just hope we find her before it's too late," Art said glumly. The thought of Jenny being hurt – or worse, being

dead – made Art's blood run cold. "She's been missing more than twenty hours now – you know how crucial the first twenty-four hours are in this type of thing..."

"You're right, I do. But if it's the same guy..." Michaels tried to choose his words carefully, "...then we know he'll take his time. He won't be in a hurry, and that will give us time to find her."

"But what will he do to her before we find her?" Art didn't want to think about it, but he knew what the guy had done to those other women before ultimately killing them, and he knew Jenny could suffer the same – if she wasn't already.

"What about offering a reward for information?" Michaels suggested. "Maybe there's somebody out there who knows something and would come forward for a reward."

"That's a good idea. I'm headed to see my brother now, I'll talk to him about it. I'll put up the money myself if I have to." Art wasn't a rich man, but he did have some money squirrelled away. A few thousand dollars might entice someone who knows something to call in with information.

"I'll get out there as soon as I can," Michaels said. "And I'll make sure Smitty tracks down that musician."

"Thanks. I'll let you know if anything develops in the meantime." Art hung up the phone hoping that *something* would happen soon to lead him to Jenny.

Before he'd reached his brother, Art's phone rang again. Chief Creighton was calling to let him know they'd received a tip from a woman in Smith Falls who said she'd seen Jenny the night before. Creighton wanted to know if Art wanted to go with his officer to speak to the woman and Art said that he did. If the woman *had* seen Jenny, Art wanted to talk to her himself. He told Creighton to have his officer pick him up at the Campbell's.

When Art reached his brother, his brother was a nervous wreck. Not wanting to create false hope, Art decided not to tell his brother about the woman who claimed to have seen Jenny. Instead, he discussed the possibility of offering a

reward. His brother agreed it was a good idea and said he'd get in touch with Art's friend who'd put out the news release and make sure the media put out word that there would be a reward for information leading to Jenny.

After settling on an amount to offer for the reward, Art told his brother he would be riding along with the police patrols for a while as they looked for Jenny. When a police car pulled up to the curb in front of the house, Art felt a small twinge of guilt at having lied to his brother, but knew it was for the best that his brother not know where he was really going until he had something solid about Jenny. He, once again, assured his brother that they'd find Jenny then he left with Officer Hanson to drive to Smith Falls.

* * * *

By the time they returned from Smith Falls having determined that it was *not* Jenny that the woman had seen, Michaels had arrived in Bright Creek. He'd brought a change of clothes for his partner, so Art took a quick shower and changed before he and Michaels headed over to the police station to talk to Tom Hopkins. When they got there, they had a brief conference with Chief Creighton before being led back to a large open area where the phone banks had been set up. There were about a dozen people manning the phones and Art scanned their faces, looking for Tom Hopkins.

Not seeing Tom, or his mother, Art turned to Creighton and said, "They're not here. You said they were here."

Creighton looked around, confused. "They *were* here. Let me ask the officer in charge." He stepped away from the two detectives to confer with one of the officers across the room.

"Fuck! I told him to keep Hopkins here!" Art fumed.

"Calm down," Michaels told him. "We'll find him. Do you really think he has something to do with Jenny's

disappearance?"

"I don't fucking know!" Art snapped. The pressure was getting to him. He needed to find his niece and he knew that, somehow, Tom Hopkins was the key to finding her.

"Detective Hauxwell?" a voice said from behind him and Art turned to see Mrs. Connor standing there looking at him with concern. "I'm so sorry about Jenny. She seems like such a nice girl. Is there any news?"

Art's eyes scanned beyond Mrs. Connor as he shook his head and responded, "No. Nothing yet." *And I'm getting so fucking tired of saying that!* he thought. "Where's Tom? I thought he was with you?"

"Oh he was here..."

"Was?"

"Well yes, he was here for quite a while but I sent him to get some lunch. The boy can't go too long without eating – his metabolism is so high – but he should be back soon. Was there anything I could help you with?" Mrs. Connor asked.

"Uh, no. We just wanted to talk to Tom, that's all," Art explained. "Do you happen to know where he went?"

"No, not exactly. But he took my car, so he shouldn't be gone too long. If there's nothing I can do for you, I'd better get back to the phones. Hopefully, we'll get a valuable tip soon." She nodded at the two detectives then walked away. They watched her as she found her way back to her seat and sat down.

By the time Creighton rejoined them to tell them that his officer hadn't even noticed Hopkins leave, Art and Michaels were already discussing whether to go look for Hopkins or to wait for his return. If he had Jenny stashed away somewhere, he might well be with her right at this very moment – but even if that were the case, how would they know where to start looking? The obvious place to start would be the cemetery, Art decided, so they left the police station and headed to Oak Lawn.

On the way there, Art told Michaels about the

mausoleum with the new lock on its gated door. It was possible Hopkins was holding Jenny right under their noses and they'd never suspected a thing. Clearly the whole white van thing had been a ruse, Art insisted. He couldn't believe they'd fallen for some psychic bullshit from a guy who could be the killer they've been looking for all along.

"Now wait a minute," Michaels objected, playing the devil's advocate. "Why are you so hell bent on disbelieving in psychic powers? From what I've seen, Hopkins doesn't seem like the type of guy who would kidnap, torture, and rape someone. Granted, he may seem a bit odd – anybody who spends all his time in a cemetery is bound to be a bit strange – but I think he's been telling us the truth. Besides, do you think he borrows his mom's car every time he wants to kidnap someone?"

"Do you think he's been telling the truth," Art challenged. "Or do you want to believe he's been telling the truth because you want to believe he's a psychic?"

"Well..."

"This isn't fun and games, Michaels! This is *my* niece! If Tom Hopkins somehow enticed her to go somewhere with him, she would've gone. She trusted the guy!"

As they pulled up in front of Oak Lawn, Art instructed Michaels to skip going to Tom's house and drive straight into the cemetery. They could see from the street there wasn't a car parked at the house, so they headed straight for the mausoleum. As they came within sight of the small gothic building, they could see no car parked anywhere near it either. They slowed to a stop and Art got out, looking for signs of anyone having recently been there, but he saw nothing to indicate that the gate or the door beyond had been opened since he'd been there earlier. He got back into the car and instructed his partner to drive around the perimeter of the cemetery. They slowly traversed the entire cemetery and didn't come upon a single car or a single person.

"Shit!" Art muttered with annoyance.

“What now?” Michaels asked just as the phone in his pocket started to ring. He took it out and answered it. “Detective Michaels,” he said into the phone. “Yeah, Smitty. Thanks. No. Not yet. Okay, I will,” he said and hung up.

He turned to Art and said, “Smitty tracked down that musician and has verified he has, for sure, been on the road with his band for the past six months travelling in his white van.”

“God dammit!” Art fumed. “This whole fucking thing has been a waste of time! Let’s get back to the police station. When Hopkins turns up, he’s going to have a lot of explaining to do!”

* * * *

She began hearing noises from outside the room again and Jenny fought down the panic that rose in her throat as the noises moved closer. *Oh god! Is he coming in here?* She heard a shuffling noise followed by a slow scraping sound and then a click as the door opened. A rush of pungent air filled the room as someone entered, closing the door behind them. Jenny sucked in a breath as the smell hit her and she instantly regretted it. Not only had she gotten a mouthful of that acrid smell, but she’d alerted her captor that she was awake.

“Hello Jenny,” a man’s voice said.

Jenny said nothing. Pretending to be asleep, she stayed still and prayed he wouldn’t kill her.

“I know you’re awake now Jenny,” he said matter-of-factly.

Jenny was determined not to let him get the best of her. “How do you know my name?” she demanded with as much bravado she could muster.

“Why, you’re famous Jenny! You’ve been all over the news today. It seems everyone is out looking for you – but don’t worry, they won’t find you here.”

“Who are you? Why are you doing this? What do you

want from me?” Jenny asked, trying to stay calm but her voice growing tremulous. There was no response and Jenny couldn’t help it, she began to cry. “Please!” she sobbed. “Please just let me go!”

Still her captor said nothing and when Jenny heard the sound of metal on metal – the sounds her father made when he sharpened his hunting knife – panic welled up inside her once more and escaped in a scream. She couldn’t help herself. Although she didn’t know all the details, she’d heard that Nancy Wilcox’s killer had cut her with a knife – had *killed her* with a knife – and her raging fear came out in a tormented howl of agony as she pulled and bucked against her restraints.

“You may as well calm down. Nobody can hear you.”

Jenny felt a strong hand clamp down on her arm and she tried to jerk away, but it was impossible. “You won’t get away with this,” Jenny said between sobs. “The police will find me and you’ll go to jail.”

“You’re a feisty one aren’t you?” her captor chuckled. “That’s going to make this so much more interesting!”

* * * *

When Art and his partner got back to the police station, they went straight back to the phone banks but Hopkins hadn’t returned yet. Irritated, Art led Michaels to Chief Creighton’s office where the three men sat down to discuss Tom Hopkins.

“I have to tell you, Detective Hauxwell,” Creighton said after hearing Art’s concerns, “I’m convinced that Tom Hopkins truly can communicate with spirits. Admittedly, at first, I thought he was off his rocker, but he’s since made a believer out of me. I think you’re barking up the wrong tree if you think Tom has anything to do with your niece’s disappearance.”

“Be that as it may, Chief, I want to question him as soon as he shows up – *if* he shows up, that is,” Art responded

with unmasked cynicism.

"Okay," Creighton sighed. "Whatever you need to do – but I think you're spinning your wheels in the wrong direction." He got up and excused himself, saying he would have his desk officer let them know when Tom returned. As he came out of his office, Creighton saw Tom, who'd just come in through the front entrance and was headed back toward the phone banks.

Ducking back into his office, he informed the two detectives that Tom was back and the three of them left his office and walked in the direction of the phone bank. When they entered the big room where phones were ringing, Creighton called out to Tom who stopped and turned toward them. Tom nodded and came back across the room to see what Chief Creighton wanted. As he did this, his mother got up and crossed the room behind him.

"Chief Creighton, Detectives," Tom said, "Is there any word on Jenny?"

"No Tom. And the detectives here would like to talk to you if you don't mind?" Creighton asked.

"Uh, sure. Okay. Just let me give this to my mom," Tom said, holding up a white bag containing the lunch he'd brought back for his mother.

"What's going on gentlemen?" Mrs. Connor asked as she approached the men.

Tom turned to her and said, "Here's your lunch mom," and handed her the bag. She took it from him but didn't turn away. "The detectives just want to talk to me for a few minutes, that's all. I'll be right back."

"Absolutely not!" Mrs. Connor snapped.

"But..." Tom began.

"No Tom," his mother said. "Don't you remember the last time a detective wanted to talk to you in this police station?" She turned to the policemen and said, "If you want to talk to my son, you'll have to do it elsewhere. There's no way I'm letting him get railroaded again for something he

didn't do."

"But Mrs. Connor," Art protested, "We only want to ask Tom a few questions – to help with finding Jenny."

"That's all well and good," she said. "But you're not going to do it *here*." She looked at each man in turn, giving each a defiant glare. "You gentlemen are welcome to come to my house and talk to Tom if you wish, but he's not going to talk to you here. Right Tom?" She turned her stare on her son who, after consideration, agreed that his mother was right.

"She's right, detectives. I'd be happy to answer any questions you might have if you'd like to come over to my mother's house."

"Okay," Art agreed. "Let's go."

Tom and his mother led the way out and the two detectives followed them back to Mrs. Connor's house. Once there, the four of them settled themselves around the dining room table and Art started in with his questions.

"So Tom, you say Jenny visited you at the cemetery around two o'clock yesterday afternoon, correct?"

"Yes. My mother had just left and I'd gone back to mowing," Tom confirmed.

"Yes, and I passed Jenny on the street as I was driving back here from the cemetery," Mrs. Connor added.

Art nodded in acknowledgement and went on, "Okay, and Jenny left you not long after that saying she was going to meet her friends to go up north?"

"Yes."

"And then you found her phone on the ground sometime later in the afternoon?"

"That's right."

"Tom, the night we interviewed you about Nancy Wilcox, you gave us the description of a white van that you say Nancy told you her killer used to dump her body. Then this morning you told me one of the spirits in the cemetery told you there'd been a white van in the cemetery yesterday when Jenny was there – is that correct?" Art asked.

“Yes, that’s correct,” Tom answered, getting confused. “What’s this all about, Detective?”

Michaels responded to this question by saying, “Mr. Hopkins, we’ve checked out your story about the white van and we haven’t been able to confirm that what you told us was accurate.”

“What do you mean?” Tom asked, looking from one man to the other. “Are you saying you think I was lying about the van? Is that what you mean?”

“We checked out every white van in the state that was a possible match to the description you gave us, but none of them matched every detail of what you described. So you see, we weren’t able to confirm the truth of the information you provided about the van,” Michaels said.

“Where’s Jenny, Tom?” Art asked bluntly. “What have you done with her?” he demanded.

“What have *I* done with her?” Tom asked, bewildered. “I haven’t done anything with Jenny! I’m trying to help you find her!”

“How dare you!” Mrs. Connor admonished. “How dare you try to accuse my son of harming anyone! Let alone Jenny!” she seethed. “That’s just ridiculous! Jenny is Tom’s friend!”

“That’s right!” Tom agreed. “Jenny is my friend and I would never hurt her – or anyone! I haven’t lied to you. Nancy Wilcox told me that van exists and I believe her.”

“The problem is, Mr. Hopkins,” Art said, “Is that *I* don’t believe *you*.”

“Alright, let’s all just calm down,” Michaels placated. “Mr. Hopkins, I really want to help you out here – I really want to believe that you’ve been telling us the truth, but my partner here, well, he’s a bit less inclined to believe that *anyone* can actually communicate with spirits. You understand?”

“Of course. Most people don’t believe me,” Tom said, disheartened.

“But Jenny does!” Tom’s mother put in. “And so do

I.”

“But *I* don’t,” Art said menacingly.

Michaels put his hand on his partner’s arm and said to Tom, “If there was just some way for you to prove it. Do something to help us find Jenny?”

“I’ve tried!” Tom said with frustration. “I don’t know how this whole thing works! I tried asking Mr. McCorkle to help but he said he couldn’t!”

“Mr. McCorkle?” Michaels asked. “He’s one of your spirits, correct?”

“Yes. He resides at Oak Lawn. But he said he wasn’t able to find Jenny. And I don’t know how else to help you find her! I just don’t know what I can do!” Tom slumped back in his chair, defeated. These detectives were probably going to take him to jail again because he didn’t know how to work this so-called *gift* that he possessed. If that happened, what would happen to Jenny while they were wasting time thinking *he* had kidnapped her?

“Wait!” Mrs. Connor said excitedly. “Tom, what about Rosalie? What if you asked for her help? Do you think she might be able to find Jenny?”

“Who’s Rosalie?” Michaels asked.

“Rosalie is – was – my wife,” Tom said. He looked at his mother and told her, “But I don’t know if I can ask her. What if she doesn’t come again?” He was almost afraid to ask her to come to him again; afraid that she wouldn’t come; afraid her visit last night may have been a dream.

“All you can do is try, Tom,” his mother said. “It can’t hurt, can it?”

Tom sighed, “I guess you’re right, mom. I guess I can try.”

“I’m getting tired of this bullshit!” Art said angrily. “Just tell us what you’ve done with Jenny! No more of your hocus pocus! Where is she?” He banged his fist on the table and made Mrs. Connor jump.

“Art, calm down,” Michaels told his partner. “Give the

guy a chance. Just *try* to give him the benefit of the doubt for a little while longer," he begged. When Art finally nodded his agreement, Michaels turned back to Tom and asked, "What do you need to do? Do we need to light some candles or something? Turn down the lights?"

Tom laughed without mirth and responded, "Honestly Detective, I'm not really sure." He turned to his mother and said, "Last night, I just closed my eyes and spoke out loud. She said I had asked her to come, so I guess I'll just try doing that?" His mother nodded and told the two detectives to be quiet so Tom could try to contact Rosalie.

Art gave Michaels a sideways glance as if to say, *you're testing my patience*, but he remained silent – as did Michaels who was, frankly, fascinated by what might be about to occur. The two men sat quietly watching as Tom placed his hands on the table and took a couple of deep breaths before closing his eyes. Art cut his eyes to Mrs. Connor who sat looking at her son with a hopeful look until she felt Art's eyes on her and she turned her gaze in his direction and narrowed her eyes at him in a threatening manner.

After closing his eyes, Tom took one more deep breath and then he began to speak out loud. "Rosalie? Rosalie, please come to me. I need you." No one moved or made a sound as Tom sat there with his eyes closed and listened for the sound of his wife's voice. When he heard nothing, he said, "Please Rosalie! Come to me!" and he strained his ears hoping to hear a response. When after a few moments, no response had come, Tom opened his eyes and let out a disappointed sigh.

"I'm sorry. I guess she's not coming," he said and his mother patted him in a gesture of comfort on the back of the hand.

"It's okay, dear," Mrs. Connor soothed. "At least you tried."

Just as Art began to complain about the theatrics, Tom heard Rosalie's voice. "Shhh!" Tom commanded. "She's here!" The two detectives looked at each other; Art's face filled with

skepticism and Michaels' face filled with excitement.

"Rosalie!" Tom said, filled with a deep happiness at hearing his wife's voice again. He wanted to tell her again all the things he'd told her the night before, but he knew he mustn't let his emotions get in the way of what needed to be done. Instead, he asked, "Rosalie, can you help me?"

What do you need from me, my love?

"We're looking for my friend, Jenny Singleton. She's missing and we don't know where to look for her. Can you find her? Can you tell us where she is?"

Yes, I can find her. But I can't tell you where she is. There are some things that must not be revealed to the living.

"What's she saying?" Michaels whispered.

"She says she can find Jenny but she can't tell us where she is," Tom relayed.

"What the fuck?" Art said loudly. "What kind of bullshit are you trying to pull, Hopkins?"

"Shhh!" Mrs. Connor shushed him and gave him a stern look.

"She says there are some things that must not be revealed to the living. I don't know what she means," Tom said to Art. Then to Rosalie he said, "Rosalie please explain. I don't understand."

Life is made of choices, my love. Choices bring about actions and actions come with consequences. I cannot interfere with the natural order of things in your realm. If I gave you the answer that you seek, I would be revealing too much.

"But..." Tom began as he tried to wrap his mind around what she was saying.

"What does she say?" Michaels whispered.

"She says if she told me where Jenny was, she would be revealing too much and it would interfere with the natural order of actions and consequences."

"God dammit!" Art yelled and slammed his fist on the table again. "This is fucking bullshit!"

"Wait!" Tom pleaded. "Rosalie, can you tell us

anything that can help us find Jenny? Please Rosalie?"

Tell the men they know where she is. Tell them to look to the plants. That is all I can tell you, my love. I must go now.

Tom suddenly felt drained and again, he slumped in his chair. "She's gone," he said weakly.

"Gone?" Art said with mock surprise. "Gone *without* telling you where Jenny is?" He looked at his partner in triumph. "I guess we're done playing charades. I think it's time for us to take you back to the police station, Hopkins."

"Wait a minute," Michaels said. "Did she tell you anything else? Anything that might help us find Jenny?"

"She said to tell you that you already know where Jenny is," Tom said and Art crossed his arms smugly and glared at him as if he thought Tom had Jenny tied up in downstairs in his mother's basement or something. "She said to tell you to look to the plants. Does that mean anything to you?"

"It means about as much as your description of the fucking white van," Art said with disgust. "Come on, Hopkins. You're coming with us. I'm arresting you on suspicion of kidnapping." He pushed back from the table and stood up. "I hope you're not going to cause us any more trouble." He walked around the table, pulling his handcuffs out of his pocket as he went.

"Art, wait!" Michaels exclaimed excitedly. "Plants! She said plants!"

Art looked at his partner as if he was as crazy as Hopkins must be. "What are you talking about?" he asked gruffly.

"I'm talking about the *plants*!" Michaels responded. "The marijuana plants, Art! In the white van!" He jumped to his feet and looked at Art, his eyes wild. "The fucking white van filled with marijuana *plants*!"

"Holy fuck!" Art looked from Michaels to Tom and back again. His eyes narrowed as he asked his partner, "You think it's possible?"

"Hell yes it's possible! What are we waiting for? Let's

go!"

Art was conflicted. On the one hand, if there was even the slightest chance that Hopkins was on the level and the pot plants they saw in the back of that van were the plants Hopkins' dead wife was talking about (and Art was still skeptical about believing that information had come from the spirit of Hopkins' dead wife) then they had to check it out as soon as possible. On the other hand, if this was another ruse, who knows what Hopkins might do to Jenny before they got back.

Making a decision, Art turned to Tom and his mother and said, "If the two of you will agree to us taking Tom down to the station before we go, then we'll not put you under arrest and we'll go check this out. *But* you'll have to stay at the station until we get back. Otherwise, I'm going to arrest you right now and have Chief Creighton lock you up while we go check on this. What'll it be?"

Tom and his mother looked at one another and Tom said, "I'll go with you to the station."

* * * *

As Tom and his mother sat in the police station waiting under the watchful eye of Chief Creighton, Art and Michaels sped toward the house they'd visited the day before. Michaels was on the phone requesting uniformed officers to meet them at the address while Art drove like a maniac trying to get there as soon as possible. Michaels was explaining to the police officer on the other end of the line that they had reason to believe the suspect had a large quantity of illegal marijuana plants on the premises and that they'd tracked him to that address from the city. It was only a little white lie, and nobody needed to know until after the fact that it wasn't exactly the truth. He warned the officer on the phone that the suspect should be treated as armed and dangerous and that the uniformed officers should not approach the house until

Michaels and his partner got there.

When he hung up the phone, he told Art everything was all set. The locals would get a search warrant for the drugs then watch the house from a distance and not try to approach until Art and Michaels got there. Once there, Art would apprise the locals of the suspected kidnapping situation and they would proceed from there. With a warrant they would be able to search the premises right away. Art hoped they would find Jenny there and that she wouldn't have been harmed. He prayed that Hopkins was being straight with them. If it turned out he'd sent them on another wild goose chase, Art would probably kill him.

* * * *

Jenny lay weeping as the warmth of the blood on her forearm slowly cooled. Her captor had left the room a while ago, but Jenny was afraid he would come back at any time. She couldn't stop thinking about the hot, searing pain of the knife as he'd slowly run it down her arm. He hadn't said anything while he'd done it – he hadn't even told her to be still – he'd simply taken hold of her elbow and pinned her arm down as she'd bucked and squirmed, screaming for him to leave her alone. As soon as she felt the first sting of the blade biting into her flesh, she instantly went still, not wanting to cause the blade to go in any deeper by moving against it. Her screams had turned to whimpers as he'd slowly made a shallow cut along her flesh.

Her blood had seemed hot and thick as it oozed out, following the path of the knife. She had no way of knowing how long ago her captor had left the room; it seemed as if it was only moments ago, but the blood on her arm was now cool and she was beginning to shiver. She briefly wondered if she was going into shock. She'd learned about shock from watching TV dramas. It was something they always talked about when someone on TV was involved in a car accident or

something. But Jenny didn't know if you could go into shock from a cut on the arm. All she knew was, she was cold and she was shivering. The mask covering her eyes was damp with her tears and snot ran down the sides of her face. She felt helpless and hopeless. What if her Uncle Art didn't find her? Where would her captor cut her next? When would he kill her? As she slipped into unconsciousness, Jenny's last thought was that she would get to see her mother again.

* * * *

Art conferred with the uniformed officers before they approached the residence. Two officers would check the garage to see if the van was inside then cover the side door of the house and two officers would go around to the back door while Art and Michaels would approach from the front. The first two officers cautiously walked up the driveway and made their way around to the side of the garage to the window Michaels had told them was there. Upon looking inside and finding the garage empty, they signaled to their counterparts that it was all clear, then the rest of them approached the house.

Once at the front door, Art banged on the door and they waited to see if anyone would answer. When no one did, Art reached above the door and felt around the sill for a key. Finding none, he nodded to his partner who stepped off the porch and picked up a rock from the barren flower bed next to the porch. He handed it to Art who used the rock to break a small pane of glass in the window of the front door not caring what ramifications might come from it later.

They carefully entered the house and made a sweep of the rooms at the front of the house. As they made their way through the house, they unlocked the other exterior doors so the uniforms could enter, then they thoroughly went through the one-story house more thoroughly; they found no one else in the house. When they were satisfied there was nothing to

find on the main floor of the house, they moved to the basement. One of the uniforms was instructed to keep watch for the homeowner's return and the rest of them went downstairs.

It was a small, cramped basement which contained a washer and dryer and a few boxes. There was a punching bag hanging in one corner and a large tapestry rug depicting two deer with horns locked in battle hung on the wall nearby. "Fuck!" Art exclaimed with exasperation. "That fucker has sent us on another snipe hunt! The weed isn't even here!" He leaned back against the washing machine, fuming.

"What's that smell?" one of the uniformed officers asked, sniffing at the air.

Art and Michaels both took a sniff and said in unison, "Marijuana plants!"

"It's not very strong," Michaels observed. "Maybe he had the plants down here and then moved them?"

"Maybe..." Art said as he moved to the boxes and lifted a few lids. Finding nothing, he told the uniforms to search all the boxes and to look around for any traces of the pot that surely must have been here not too long ago. As they all began looking around the small basement for traces of the marijuana plants, one of the uniformed officers moved the tapestry and discovered a door hidden behind it.

"Hey! Look at this!" he cried with excitement as he held the tapestry back, revealing the door.

"Holy shit!" Michaels breathed. He and Art went to the door; it was locked.

"Look for a key!" Art yelled. "You two," he said pointing, "Search upstairs. Bring me any keys you can find." Nodding, they hurried up the stairs.

* * * *

Jenny was standing in the sunshine next to a pond watching a family of ducks floating on the blue surface. "The

ducklings are adorable," her mother said as she stepped up beside Jenny and linked arms with her.

"Yes, they are," Jenny agreed.

They stood there arm in arm watching the baby ducklings swimming in a line behind their mother as a gentle breeze blew across the pond cooling them. Jenny began to shiver and her mother put her arm around the girl to warm her.

"Will I see you again soon, mom?" Jenny asked.

"No Jenny. You won't see me again for quite a long time yet. But I'm glad you're here with me now."

"Me too. I really miss you, mom."

"I know you do. But remember, I'm always with you. Promise me you won't forget."

"I won't forget."

"Good. Now it's time for you to be strong and to wake up, darling."

Jenny woke to darkness and a clacking noise. It took her a moment to remember the blindfold covering her eyes, and a moment more to realize the clacking was the sound of her teeth chattering. She felt so cold! She was suddenly overcome with sadness as the dream came back to the front of her mind; she remembered being with her mother in the dream. If only her mother were really here with her!

All the hair on Jenny's body stood up as she heard shuffling coming from outside the room. Her teeth stopped chattering and she felt a rush of adrenaline as fear sent her into fight or flight mode. She knew she couldn't flee and fighting was just as impossible; the sudden rush of adrenaline quickly faded leaving her tired and hopeless once more. In that moment, Jenny was sure that her mother had been wrong in the dream when she'd said that Jenny wouldn't be seeing her again for a long time yet – because Jenny knew she was going to die soon and when she died, she *would* see her mother again. She just knew it.

The shuffling sounds seemed to go on forever. The anticipation was driving Jenny to the brink of madness. It

sounded like a heard of animals was moving around in the next room. The sounds weren't loud, but they were loud enough to strike fear and dread in Jenny's heart. She felt like the condemned man awaiting his executioner. And there was nothing she could do but lie there and wait.

After what seemed like forever, Jenny opened her mouth and yelled, "Just get it over with already! What are you waiting for?" Suddenly the shuffling sounds stopped. But Jenny wasn't relieved by this – on the contrary. It occurred to her a bit too late that she may have angered her kidnapper. What would he do to her if he got angry?

* * * *

They ended up busting the door in because they had neither the time nor the patience to find a key for it. The door swung inward and the basement was suddenly flooded with light and the odor of a multitude of large, healthy marijuana plants. The policemen carefully entered the hidden room and swept it for any signs of inhabitants. Finding no one, they began searching the room for any signs of Jenny having been there. The room was twice the size of the basement room on the other side of the hidden door and it was filled with neatly placed rows of potted plants under grow lights. The room was totally encased with reflective foil, which made the lights even brighter, and there was a bench along one wall that held watering equipment next to a washtub which was clearly the source of water for the plants.

As the men slowly made their way through the room looking for any sign that Jenny may have been there, one of the officers went upstairs to radio in what they'd found and to call for the narcotics squad. Art didn't give a damn about the pot; he wanted to find his niece and he wanted to find her *now*. He still didn't know what to think about Tom Hopkins, but if they didn't find Jenny soon, Art was going to resort to torture if he had to in order to get the truth out of Hopkins.

"There's nothing here, Art," Michaels said with frustration. "Maybe we should get outside and search the property. Maybe there's a shed out back or something."

"How did Hopkins know about the marijuana plants?" Art asked. "How the fuck did he *know*?"

"Well you know my opinion, Art. I still want to believe the guy has a gift. Otherwise, how would he have known about the plants being in the van?"

"Because maybe he and this other guy are in it together and he's trying to throw this guy under the bus," Art speculated. They continued looking around, moving plotted plans aside, scanning the floor, looking for some kind of clue.

"Hey, what was that?" Michaels said, thinking he'd heard something. Everyone stopped moving around and listened.

"I don't hear anything," one of the uniformed officers said.

"Me neither," said another.

"What did it sound like?" Art asked.

"Not sure. Just heard something," Michaels responded.

Instinctively, Art knew it was Jenny. "She's here," he said with conviction. "Jenny's here and we've got to find her! Rip down that foil, see if you can find another door!"

The four men went to the walls and began pulling at the foil. "Here!" Michaels shouted as he found a panel of foil that moved as if on rollers. He pushed it aside and discovered the door concealed behind it. This door was much more solid than the other door had been and again, the door was locked. Not wanting to waste time, Art desperately looked around the room for anything they could use to get the door open.

* * * *

As suddenly as the noises in the next room had stopped, they started up again – only this time they were closer.

When Jenny heard the scraping sound just outside, she knew her kidnapper had returned. She tensed and waited for the sound of the door opening. Instead, she heard a muffled banging sound. *Bang! Bang! Bang!* There was a rhythm to it as if someone were pounding with a hammer. Along with the banging sound, she heard a muffled voice. It sounded like the voice was calling her name.

She turned her head in the direction of the sound and strained her ears. Was someone calling her name? *The psycho who brought me here knows my name*, Jenny thought. Was this some part of his sick game? Was he trying to make her think someone had come to rescue her only to rip that hope out from under her? She didn't know. She laid there listening as the banging noise and the voice continued. Finally, clinging to a desperate hope that someone had really found her, Jenny opened her mouth and yelled, "I'm here! Help me! I'm here!"

* * * *

When the door finally gave way, Art heard the sound of Jenny's voice and his knees nearly buckled in relief. He pushed his way through the door and rushed inside. Jenny was there, tied down to a table in the center of the small room. "Jenny!" he cried with emotion.

"Uncle Art?" Jenny cried, "Is that you?" She started to cry as her uncle came to her and told her that she was safe now; he was there.

* * * *

Word of Jenny's rescue spread through Bright Creek like wildfire. Tom and his mother, being at the police station, were two of the first to hear. The relief Tom felt was immeasurable. Chief Creighton had come to them to tell them himself and to let them know Jenny was going to be okay. She'd been taken to the hospital to be checked out, just in case,

but Detective Hauxwell had told him he was sure that, physically at least, Jenny would be fine. Chief Creighton also told them that while Jenny's kidnapper had not yet been apprehended, police agencies all over the state were looking for the guy and Detective Hauxwell was confident it wouldn't take long before he was in custody.

Detective Hauxwell had instructed Chief Creighton to allow Tom to go home, as he was no longer a suspect, so Tom and his mother left the police station elated that Jenny was safe and Tom was no longer under suspicion. Exhausted after the events of the day, Tom told his mother he needed to go home and rest, so Mrs. Connor dropped him off at his cottage, making him promise he would call her first thing in the morning and let her know he was okay.

Tom let himself into his house and after locking the door behind him he went straight to the bedroom where he sat down at the foot of his bed. He felt completely drained and didn't even have the energy to take off his shoes. He laid back on the bed fully clothed, staring at the ceiling and hoping that Jenny truly was going to be okay. As he stared at the ceiling, Tom thought about Rosalie and the way he'd been able to call her to him. He remembered what she'd told him the night before: *Just know that I am aware of it each time you think of me. I am aware of everything you say to me when you talk to me. I may not answer, but I do hear you. I love you and I will never be far away.* Just before he closed his eyes and fell asleep, Tom spoke aloud, "Thank you Rosalie. I love you."

* * * *

The following morning Tom woke refreshed and ravenous. After calling his mother as he'd promised, he showered and got dressed then made himself a big breakfast. When he'd finished eating his breakfast, he sat back in his chair and savored a second cup of coffee; he was in no hurry to get to work this morning. He took his time and enjoyed having a

peaceful morning with no worries. There had been so much going on lately – so many things to worry about – but today Tom was not going to worry about anything. Jenny was safe, he was no longer a suspect, and if they hadn't already caught Jenny's kidnapper during the night, he would soon be in jail and unable to hurt anyone else.

When Tom finished cleaning up after breakfast, he put on his work boots and got ready for his day. The sun was shining, and the sky was clear. He looked forward to getting outside into the fresh air. He walked out onto his front porch, closing the door behind him, just as a car was pulling into his driveway. He could see Detective Hauxwell behind the wheel and Mr. Singleton in the passenger seat.

Detective Hauxwell turned off the engine and before the two men could get out of the car, the back door opened and Jenny climbed out. She ran to Tom and threw her arms around him, making him feel awkward, but he was pleased to see her. He awkwardly returned the hug, bending down to give the girl a gentle squeeze.

When she let go of him and stepped back, she smiled up at him and said, "Thank you Tom. You saved my life! I don't know how I can ever thank you enough!"

"Seeing you here is all the thanks I need, Jenny. I'm just glad you're okay," Tom said, relieved that she appeared to be okay. Except for a bandage wrapped around her forearm, she appeared to be unharmed.

They exchanged a few more words as Jenny's father and uncle approached them. Jenny turned to her father and held out her hand to him. "Dad, I don't know if you've ever actually met Tom, but *this* is my friend, Tom Hopkins."

Mr. Singleton stepped forward and stuck his other hand out to Tom. The two men shook hands and Mr. Singleton said, "Mr. Hopkins, I can't thank you enough for what you've done for my little girl. I don't know how I can ever repay you. You're a real hero."

"I'm happy I was able to help," Tom said, somewhat

embarrassed at being referred to as a hero. "And I'm glad Jenny is safe now."

Art Hauxwell interrupted and said, "Okay you two, it's time for the jackass in the room to speak." Jenny and her father stepped back so Art could talk to Tom.

Art cleared his throat and said, "Tom, I owe you a huge apology. I'm sorry I didn't believe you. You were right about the van, by the way. We took the guy into custody last night and on closer inspection of the van we found that the logo we *thought* had been painted on it was actually a removable decal. I can't believe we missed that the first time we went to check out the van, but there it is and I'm sorry."

Tom nodded but said nothing as Art went on, "I don't know how I can ever make it up to you, but I hope you'll forgive me for not believing you. Hell, if not for you, we wouldn't have found Jenny!" He turned and looked over his shoulder at his niece who stood with Art's brother a few yards away; her eyes were closed, and her face was tilted toward the sun.

Art brought his attention back to Tom and confided, "I don't know what I would've done if we hadn't found Jenny in time. I really don't know how to thank you for your help. Without you, there's no way we would've found her." His voice wavered and he cleared his throat again before saying, "Thank you," and putting out his hand. Tom took Art's hand and shook it, not knowing what to say. He looked over at Jenny and smiled, glad everything had turned out okay and glad that his gift had finally turned out to be a gift after all.

Coming Soon:

Tom's Surprise

Book 2 of the Tom Series!